

The ROAD to **RIDGEBY'S**



By FRANK BURLINGAME HARRIS



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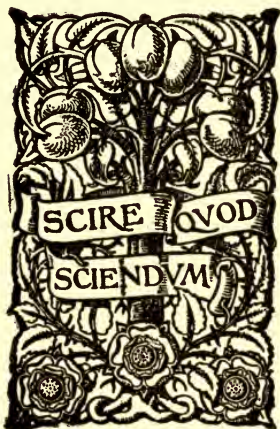
CALIFORNIA

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

The Road to Ridgeby's

By

Frank Burlingame Harris



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To Robert Burns Peattie

FOREWORD

WHILE the cost of a literary achievement is not to be considered in arriving at its true artistic worth, it is but human to feel a deeper interest in that book which has made great and costly demands upon its author. Into the story which the following pages present, a young man of large ambitions, of keen discernment and generous, sympathetic impulses, put the ripest effort and the dearest hopes of his life. He lived to learn that his book had been accepted by a publisher, but his eyes did not see a page of its proof.

Few words are required to give the material facts in the life of Frank Burlingame Harris. He was born September 26, 1873, at Weedsport, N. Y., where his father, then a Baptist minister, was preaching. His whole life, however, was spent in the West and he belonged distinctively to the prairie country. The first outcroppings of the boy's talent appeared when attending the Omaha High School. There he conducted, in association with a com-

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panion, a school paper called "The Register. Its editorial crispness gave the juvenile journal an unexpected popularity and attracted the attention of members of the local newspaper fraternity. Among those first to recognize his promise of cleverness was Mrs. Elia W. Peattie, then editorial writer of the Omaha World-Herald. Immediately following his graduation from the high school he secured work as a substitute reporter on that newspaper.

His first assignments were handled with so fair a display of resourcefulness, energy, and literary skill, that, when he was but eighteen years of age, young Harris was sent to Lincoln to act as a legislative correspondent for his newspaper. Thereafter he was permanently connected with the World-Herald staff until, in 1893, he came to Chicago. At the University of Chicago he took a special course in English and American literature under Professor Wilkinson. Meantime he made an effort to establish a magazine in Chicago. It was called

The Calumet. Although young Harris discontinued its publication after a few months,

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this unprofitable venture brought him the acquaintance and friendship of several western writers.

He determined to write a novel of farm life in the Middle West, and set about his task with characteristic directness and enthusiasm. This impulse came to him in the summer, and he immediately left Chicago for the prairies of Iowa, where he spent weeks in tramping from farm to farm, forming an intimate acquaintance with the life of the country. The novel was written after his return to Chicago, in the autumn. He was then engaged to accompany a party of American excursionists on a visit to the Mediterranean countries, acting as correspondent for several Metropolitan newspapers. His experience on his trip in La Touraine were gathered in a small souvenir volume called A Pleasure Pilgrimage..

At once he returned to his novel with renewed enthusiasm and devotion. He applied himself to the task with intemperate zeal. When its second writing was finished he was forced to recognize that his health was shattered. At

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once he went with his parents to the Boston Mountains, in Missouri, but declined in strength instead of improving. The following summer was spent very wretchedly in Chicago, and the winter saw him journeying in a "mover's wagon" across New Mexico, making the final stand in the last pitiful campaign for life. Long after his days of extreme weakness began, he continued the revision of his novel, declaring that, as it was his only contribution to a world he was soon to leave, he would like it to be the best within his power, no matter how great the cost in effort and perseverance. He was twenty-four years old when he put aside the story which is here offered, saying: "I can't think any more!"

The personality of Frank Burlingame Harris was as striking as his tall frame and strong countenance. Generosity, sympathy and impulsiveness were his most conspicuous traits.

FORREST CRISSEY.

Chapter I

ALITTLE red store stands at Beverly Corners, where the county road crosses the Hawkins turnpike. Opposite it a dilapidated smithy leans against an old cottonwood tree. The highways intersect each other on the summit of a little ridge. In all directions the undulating Iowa prairie rolls like the waves of a wind-tossed ocean. Rail fences zigzag here and there cutting up the country into crazy patchwork. Dotting the landscape are growths of stunted trees, surrounding, in most cases, an unpretentious farm house with its unpainted barns and straw-thatched cattle sheds. Tall, untrimmed willow hedges wave in the breeze; a small stream of murky water flows sluggishly through a closely cropped pasture, under a culvert, and is lost in a cornfield. Away off to the east the gilded dome of the court house in the county seat, some ten miles away, can be seen glimmering in the sunlight.

The air is heavy with silence. When the

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wind rises a little it brings with it the rattle of a distant mower that swells and sinks again. At times the bellow of a cow in the next hollow, or the low bark of a dog as he lazily scratches at some old gopher hole breaks in on the stillness. But all these sounds, with the rustle of the corn and the sighs of the ripening grain are so drowsy that they add only to the oppressing silence.

The mellow haze of late summer hung over the prairie. The rays of the sun fell on the ridges and made deep shadows in the vales. They beat down mercilessly while the green leaves of corn crumpled and turned yellow, and the ripening grain scorched on the withering stalks.

The walls of the little red store warped and crackled in the heat. The paint curled and stood in flakes on its baked sides. The striped sticks of peppermint in the window were half-melted.

A little old woman was sitting stiffly in a straight-backed chair by the door. A faded

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shawl was wrapped about her spare shoulders. A prim white collar encircled her throat. Her black alpaca dress was buttoned to the chin. Her thin, sharp features looked fairly cold. She was gazing across the road to where a man had thrown himself down within the shade of the smithy. He was whistling "Bon Ami." Her small grey eyes reflected her displeasure. She detested whistling and tramps.

Two ragged urchins crept timidly in at the door. They were the Peasley twins. The old lady got up and went behind the counter.

"Well!" she exclaimed, sharply.

The twins each dug a dirty toe into a crack in the floor. One looked beseechingly at the other.

"Two sticks o' red pep'mint, Miss Latey," faltered one of them, "An' please don't give us no broken ones."

"It's a blessed wonder you young 'uns don't spile yer teeth a eatin' s'much sweet truck," the old lady scolded in a high-keyed voice. "Yer paw'd better be a payin' up 'at mor'gage

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o' his'n thun givin' you brats money to ruin yer stummicks with."

"But please, Miss Latey, to-day's our birfday, an' we's six years old," whimpered one of the twins. "An' paw give us two cents t' cel'brate with."

"Huh!" sniffed the old lady, "With six young'uns lyin' 'round I shud think he'd spank ye' all good on yer birthdays, sted o' wastin' pennies on yeh; but yer paw allus was a fool."

The twins dug their little fat fists into their eyes and began to whimper. Miss Latey hastily took two sticks of peppermint from one of the jars in the window and laid them on the counter.

"Take yer truck an' run long," she snapped, "An don't yeh lemme see yer dirty faces 'round here again in a hurry. Now scat!"

The twins grasped the candy and laying down their coppers scampered out. The old lady followed them to the door and watched the cloud of dust raised by their pattering bare feet as

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they raced up the turnpike. Her features softened just a trifle, but they hardened again when she looked back at the man sitting in the shade. He was still whistling "Bon Ami."

The man was lying outstretched with his head propped against a stake which had once served as a hitching post for the smithy. He was idly biting at a blade of timothy. On closer inspection he did not look so much like a tramp. His clothing was rough but comparatively new. The straw hat resting by his side was wide of brim but of good material. His eyes were a clear blue, and his face, covered by a brown beard, was rather handsome than otherwise. He stopped whistling for a moment and gazed lazily toward the little red store. Then he began whistling "Bon Ami" again.

A democrat wagon, drawn by two horses, drove past. On the front seat sat a coarse-featured man and a ruddy-cheeked girl. The man was laughing loudly. The girl's eyes were bent away in the distance.

A quaint figure came down through the pas-

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ture. It was an undersized woman clad in a simple slip of calico. A great sunbonnet shaded her features. Her face, creased and wrinkled, was wreathed in smiles. She nimbly climbed the fence and approached the man. As she came up to him the quaint smile on her face deepened, and she dropped a curtsy.

"They laid down jes' like little dogs an' died," she said, and laughed merrily. "Yes, they laid down jes' like little dogs an' died."

She dropped another curtsy and turned up the road. When she had gone about a rod she turned around.

"They laid down jes' like little dogs and died," she called. "Yes, they laid down jes' like little dogs an' died."

She laughed cheerily again, and continued up the road.

The man smiled to himself and tapping his head significantly, began whistling again. He tried "Annie Laurie," but dropped it after a few bars. He closed his eyes and lulled by the lotus influence about him sank into a half doze.

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He was started into life again in a moment by the sound of a frantic voice piping up the road.

“Hey there! Catch him! Stop him! Catch holt the rope! Whoa, there! Whoa!”

He opened his eyes. A roan calf was coming on the bias down the turnpike. His tail was waving stiffly in the air. In excited pursuit was a stoop-shouldered old man, very much out of breath. His arms were flying madly, and the wind blew the long tails of his coat out behind him, like the trunk rack of a stage coach.

“Stop him! Head him off! Catch holt the rope;” he piped shrilly. “Hey there! Stop him! Whoa there! Whoa!”

The calf kicked up his heels and made a dash for a break in the fence. Miss Latey hurried out of her door with a frantic “Shoo!”

The calf turned and rushed straight at the man in the shade, and shying, brought the long rope that trailed in its wake within easy reach of his arm. The man turned on his side, reached quietly out, clutched the rope, and giv-

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ing it a quick twist around the hitching post, held it. The calf came to a sudden stop and sprawled heels over head on the ground. The old man came up.

“Stop him! Catch him! Turn him!” he gasped. “Catch holt the rope! Head him off! Whoa there! Whoa!”

He was blowing like a porpoise.

“Catch him! Catch holt the rope!” he sputtered. “Head him—!”

“I guess that I have filled all your requirements,” the man in the shade said calmly, as he easily resisted a last attempt of the calf to break away. “I have stopped him, and turned him, and headed him off, and caught hold of the rope. Here, take him.”

“C-C-Ca-tch him—I mean, thank ye,” puffed the old man, as he wiped his face with a great red cotton handkerchief. “My Land! I haint done sech a heap o’ runnin’ sence Bull Run, I’ll be Gummed ef I have. Th’ Gummed calf bruk away fr’ m me up there by Si Johnson’s place an’ I thought I never was a goin’ t’

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ketch 'im. Ef they'd a tuk my *advice*—Whoa there! Whoa!" he called soothingly to the calf.

He took the rope and gingerly loosened it from the hitching post, uttering soothing "Whoas." The calf had a mild look like twilight in its eyes, but starting suddenly into life again, it gave its tail a flirt and dashed up the turnpike. The old man held desperately to the rope and went reluctantly but firmly in the wake of the calf.

The man in the shade smiled to himself and began again to whistle "Bon Ami."

The afternoon was waning. The sun was already below the cottonwoods in the west and was casting a shadow of rubies over the wheat heads. The men were leaving the fields and with their teams now and then appeared in sight on the ridges only to disappear down the swales. The horses hung their heads from fatigue; the men tramped stolidly behind them. The tramp-like stranger watched them indolently, his eyes following now one group and

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then another. The crows began to rise from the corn fields and fly in flocks toward the north. The little breeze that had been blowing went down. The silence became denser.

A low creaking rumble sounded from up the road. A heavy farm wagon laden with tiling came in sight. So heavy was the load that the horses could scarcely pull it. Their drooping heads and lagging gait showed their fatigue. Every time they faltered the driver gave them a cut with a long "blacksnake" whip. He was a huge swarthy-faced man with a growth of bristling whiskers on his face. His features were heavy and rugged, and his eyes were hard. He wore no hat. His head was covered by a shock of black tangled hair, in which the dust had settled. His coarse gingham shirt was open at the front, displaying his brown, shaggy chest.

He came to the corners where the horses lagged and all but stopped.

"Gee up! Dam yeh!" he shouted as he gave each of them a cut with the whip. "Gee up!"

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The stranger rose from his seat in the shade. He showed himself to be tall and broad shouldered. Two long strides brought him into the middle of the road.

“Stop whipping those horses,” he said quietly.

The driver turned on him savagely.

“What th’ Hell’s it to you!” he snarled. “Ther mine an’ I’ll whip ’em if I want t’ an’ you too ef yeh put in any o’ yer lip. Gee up! Gee—!” and he struck each of the horses another blow.

The young man, without a word, turned to the wagon and putting his foot on one of the hind wheels began to clamber up. The driver turned with an oath and springing upon the tiling, dealt him two terrific blows full in the face.

“I’ll teach yeh!” he shouted. “I’ll teach yeh ’at I’m Hi Simms an’ owns my own horses.”

Two great welts rose where the whip struck. The man was staggered for a moment, but recovering instantly, sprang forward. He

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received another stinging blow, but without faltering reached out and seizing Simms by the waist before he could raise the whip again, hurled him to the ground. Leaping after he wrenched the whip from Simms' hand. With an oath the driver regained his feet and sprang at his assailant.

“Z-z-z-z-z-z-zud.”

The whip whistled through the air and curled around Simms' shoulders. He uttered a snarl and sprang again.

“Z-z-z-z-z-z-zud.”

Again the whip wrapped itself with a hiss around Simms' shoulders. Snarling and cursing he attempted again and again to reach his antagonist. Each time the young man dodged him as easily as a grasshopper eludes a cat, while the rain of blows about Simms' body continued without a miss. Roaring with pain and anger the driver was finally whipped into submission. He stood still fairly foaming at the mouth.

“Do you give up?” he was asked quietly.

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“Dam ye!” snarled Simms.

“Then unhitch your horses and drive them home without the wagon. That can stay here until you come back with a fresh team. I will guard it until you return.”

Simms glared at him for a moment, then went to the wagon and unhitching the horses, started cursing up the road.

The young man watched him until he had gone some distance. Then he turned in search of water to apply to the welts on his face. They were smarting like fire.

Chapter II

THE excitement of this struggle with Simms had made the young man oblivious to everything else. Turning he found that his engagement had not been without a spectator. A sleek, round little horse, hitched to a broken-down wagon, had halted just behind him and gone to sleep. The occupant of the carriage was not so listless. When the young man's eyes fell upon him he was clambering to the ground with what speed the weight of some seventy years would allow. A frayed whip with a broken tip was grasped in his hand. He was thin and bent and had hovering about him the air of a woman. There was a flash in his faded eyes and as he reached the ground he gripped tighter the handle of the whip while his jaws shut together with a snap of determination. As he gazed at the young man before him, and then at the retreating form of Simms, the expression on his face lightened. A broad grin slowly spread over his features and he bobbed his head up and down.

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“Licked him, by Dumb, didn’t yeh,” he chuckled, as he advanced with a half-limp. “I was a gittin’ here ’uz lively’s I cud, but my, ye’ didn’t need no help.” He bobbed his head up and down again and chuckled.

He received no reply. The cuts on the young man’s face were inflaming rapidly and had swollen until he could scarcely see out of his eyes.

The grin on the old man’s face deepened as he watched Simms plodding in the wake of his horses. He slapped his knee gleefully.

“That did me a heap o’ good, Dumb ef it didn’t. You throwed him off’n that box too pretty for anything. How he did howl. Guess he knows how whippin’ dumb brutes feels now.” He chuckled again and bobbed his head.

Then he noticed the welts on the young man’s face. He stopped chuckling and the broad grin on his face gave way to a look of sympathy.

“You didn’t git off scot-free though, did ye’,” he exclaimed, solicitously. “Them’s mighty ugly cuts and must smart powerful.

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Come down here to the creek an' we'll put some water on 'em. Burn pretty lively?" he asked, as he turned towards the little stream.

The young man admitted that they did.

When they came to the banks, the old man reached around to one of the tail pockets of his shiny black coat and took out a folded handkerchief. Seizing it by one corner he gave it a flirt that opened it. Then stooping stiffly he wet it in the water and carefully applied it to the welts. He was as gentle as a woman. He was thanked simply.

"There, guess that's better, haint it," he asked as he wet the handkerchief and re-applied it. The grin came over his face again.

"Wonder ef Simms' got anybody t' water his cuts?" he chuckled. "You gave him a few licks that humped him mightily."

"I'm sorry that I struck him so hard," the young man said.

"He's tough an' kin stand it. Guess it'll do 'm more good'n harm anyway. He's kinder bullied this section for sometime an' it does me

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good t' see 'im licked. Guess he'll be kinder keeful who's 'round next time he goes to licking horses."

The old man chattered on, now tenderly as he applied the wet handkerchief and then chuckling to himself and bobbing his head up and down as he feasted his memory on the whipping of Hi Simms.

The cold applications allayed somewhat the inflammation in the young man's face and by the time Simms returned with a fresh team he was quite comfortable. The old man was the first to see Simms far up the road.

"How do yeh like whippin' horses, Hi? 'Taint s'much fun uz yeh thought it was, be it?" he jeered when Simms had come within hearing distance. "Met yer match that time, didn't yeh," he chuckled, "Wait till th' boys hear 'bout it."

Simms did not reply. He hitched the team to the wagon and climbed upon the seat. Then he turned sullenly around. His dark face was ugly with a frown of hate.

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"Dam yeh!" he snarled. "I'll play even with yeh fer this."

Clucking to his horses he drove off. The old man jeered after him.

"Well, I must be goin'," he exclaimed turning with an awakening energy, to his wagon. "I guess we're done here. Going' up th' road a piece?"

The young man told him he did not know.

"Where yeh goin'?" the old man asked.

"Nowhere," he was answered.

The old man looked surprised and puzzled.

"That's a good ways off," he replied. "Better git in with me an' ride a piece. Where'd yeh cum from?"

"Same place."

"Where's that?"

"Nowhere."

The old man opened his eyes.

"That's mighty fur off, too. How'd yeh cum, walk?"

"Part of the way."

"An th' rest?"

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"Rode."

"What on?"

"Shank's mare."

"Purty good! Purty good!"

The old man grinned, bobbed his head and slapped his knee.

"Cum fr'm nowhere, goin' nowhere, walked part o' th' way, an' rode th' rest on Shank's mare. Purty good! Purty good." He put back his head and laughed loudly. "Well ef you haint th' funniest feller I ever see." He laughed again.

"Ef yeh haint goin' nowhere don't s'pose it makes much diff'runce jes' when yeh git there, so yeh'd better git in an' go up t' my place t' supper. Emily'll be glad t' see yeh. There haint much t' eat, but th' feller 'at kin lick Hi Simms is welcome t' his sheer of it. Better come long."

He started for the wagon. It was a quaint figure he cut as he half limped towards it. His spare form was clad in a shiny suit of black diagonal considerably too big for him. It was

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wrinkled and creased and had an odor of camphor and tobacco hanging about it. He wore a turndown collar and a black cravat. A rumped beaver hat was tilted back on his head. A fringe of white hair straggled down all around it.

He climbed into the wagon and turned back.

“Better cum 'long,” he repeated. “No trouble 'tall. Emily'll be glad t' see yeh.”

After a moment's hesitation the young man followed him into the wagon. The little mare was awakened with a chirrup. They rode a little ways in silence.

“I'm Hiram Ridgeby,” the old man said abruptly as he flicked a fly off the flanks of the mare. “I've got a farm up here next t' Si Johnson's. I'm sup'viser o' Hawkins township and chairman o' th' school committee. Now who might you be?”

“Abraham Lincoln.”

“Pshaw, now re'lly?”

“I might be, but some how I'm not.”

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The old man bobbed his head again and chuckled.

" Purty good! Purty good! Got a name? "

" Yes. "

" What is it? "

" Newton Mills. "

Ridgeby pushed his hat further back on his head and held out a wrinkled hand. Mills took it.

" Newton Mills I'm proud t' see yeh. As sup'viser o' Hawkins township an' chairman o' the school committee I bid yeh welcome. " Ridgeby's voice became oratorical. " Any man 'at kin whale Hi Simms deserves an' shall receive our humble hospitality. How old be yeh? "

" Twenty-four. "

" R'publican? "

" No. "

" Dem'crat? "

" No. "

" Ah, Pop'list? " The old man's face lighted.

" No. "

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“What be yeh then, Pro’bition er Woman’s suffragist?”

“Neither.”

“My Land. What be yeh then?”

“Presbyterian.”

“Purty good! Purty good!” Ridgeby bobbed his head and chuckled.

“Workin’ at it very hard?”

“Not very.”

“Sort of a muscular Christian, haint yeh.”

“More muscular than Christian.”

“Well, yeh got in some good licks this afternoon ’at must ’a been heard in heaven.” He gave vent to his customary chuckle.

The old man rattled on, going from religion to crops and from crops to politics and back again. The old wagon rattled on as well. It seemed to Mills that at every turn of the wheels the old trap must fall into pieces. Ridgeby was compelled to raise his voice at times to be heard above the trackle-trackle-trackle of the wheels. The fact that Mills took no particular part in the conversation did not disturb the old man

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seriously. He probably considered himself fully competent to do all the talking and do it well. Now and then his companion would reply to a direct question in a manner that would have been impudent had it not been for the peculiarly good-natured way in which he spoke. These odd answers seemed to amuse Ridgeby more and more and before they had ridden very far he had exhausted himself in chuckles.

The sun was just disappearing below the swells in the west. It was of the hue of blood and painted the bank of clouds behind which it was setting a glorious orange that was deepening into crimson. The air was heavy and tremulous. The birds, whose songs had been heard earlier in the day from the tops of the rail fences or from the swaying pinnacle of a cornstalk, were voiceless. Now they perched silently on the fences and pecked industriously at the wood or bobbed about on the bending stalks as though waiting to be rocked to sleep. Now and then a quail would start out from

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the dusty weeds that lined the road and run for a ways ahead of the mare.

“That’s my place, over yon,” said Ridgeby, pointing with his whip, after they had ridden some time. The fat little mare pricked up her ears and broke into a trot. “We’re jes’ comin’ t’ my south line. That stun marks it.” Ridgeby leaned out and swept his hand proudly in a semi-circle. “There’s th’ bes’ piece o’ land in Iowya. Nary a wet acre on th’ hull place, an’ good for fifty bushels t’ th’ acre year in an’ year out.”

They turned up a lane lined with waving willow trees, that led off from the main road. Before them stood a one-story stone house with a frame addition built out on one side of it. Before the front door towered two giant walnut trees. A white picket fence surrounded the house. Some ways off to the left, at the far end of a large yard, stood a great red barn. The little mare turned in at the gate and coming down to a walk headed towards it. A great Newfoundland dog, gray and stiff, rose from

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the kitchen door and trotted in the wake of the buggy. As they passed the house Mills heard a girl's sweet voice singing "Bon Ami."

"That's Sibley Ann," Ridgeby explained as the mellow notes rising higher floated out the open window.

Mills turned and caught a glimpse of a girl's form.

A pig sprang up from the road.

"Chase him, Towser," Ridgeby shouted.

The pig ran squealing towards a pair of bars that led into a meadow, the dog in eager pursuit. The pig won the race and the dog with a parting bark returned with his tail waving triumphantly. The mare stopped at the open door of the barn.

"Whoa!" called Ridgeby. The command did not seem to be addressed to the mare.

"Comin' "

The word came wandering from somewhere out of the depths of the barn. The voice was deep and sounded as though the speaker had

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started to say something and then had changed his mind and swallowed it.

They clambered out of the wagon. A great forkful of hay fell on the barn floor before them, followed rapidly by two more. Then there came another muffled, half swallowed, call.

“Look out!”

A pitchfork fell on the heap. It was followed by a man. He was covered with chaff and stood clearing it from his eyes. A handful of it rested on his shock of red hair. He was tall and husky. A rough good humour shone on his face. There was a twinkle in his small blue eyes. He was Lilt Murdock, Hiram Ridgeby's man of all-work.

“This is Newton Mills, Lilt,” said Ridgeby, abruptly, as an introduction.

Lilt looked Newton over from head to foot.

“Kin yeh wras'le,” he asked after he had completed the inventory.

Ridgeby chuckled.

“Kin he wras'le. Well I shud say he cud

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wras'le. He jes' gave Hi Simms th' wuss wolloping he ever got. Handled him like he was a cat. Wras'le! I never see nothin' like it."

Lilt's eyes opened but he sniffed disdainfully. He spoke abruptly.

"Licked Hi Simms! Don't b'lieve it."

"Licked him till he howled for mercy," chuckled Ridgeby, bobbing his head. "An' did it easy 'uz breakin' yearlin' steers, too."

"Don't b'lieve it," Lilt repeated, with conviction. "Why he looks like a city chap."

Mills smiled.

"He did it, Lilt, Dumb ef he didn't. I seen th' hull thing m'self. Believe he cud throw you, Lilt, Dumb, ef I don't."

Lilt put back his head and laughed uproariously. Then he put his arms akimbo and looked down at Mills disdainfully.

"Do you want to try throwin' me, Sonny," he laughed. "It's mighty dang'rous biz'ness. Ther haint nobody in Hawkins county 'at kin stand up with me three minutes."

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Mills smiled with easy confidence.

“ I'll try it.”

“ Come on then.”

Scarcely were the words spoken when lightning like Newton sprang forward. There was a quick clasp, a turn of the knee, a twist, and Lilt found himself hurled bodily on the pile of hay. He got up clumsily. There was a look of surprise on his face and a startled tone of protest in his voice.

“ Hey there! ” he exclaimed ruefully. “ Yeh haint totin' fair. I didn't know yeh was comin' .”

Ridgeby chuckled and bobbed his head.

“ He throwed yeh square, Lilt, Dumb ef he didn't, he throwed yeh square.”

“ He can't do it again,” Lilt replied doggedly.

“ Look out then,” laughed Newton. “ I will give you fair warning this time that I am coming.”

It was not so easily done again. Lilt planted himself firmly. He caught Mills with his

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favourite hold and gave him a toss that had rarely failed to bring his opponents to grass. What was his surprise to see this agile fellow turn in the air like a cat and alight on his feet. Lilt was beginning to get a little angry and forgetting discretion he sprang wildly forward. Mills easily eluded him and with a trip sent the hired man sprawling to the floor. The fall was a heavy one and Lilt got up slowly. Ridgeby bobbed his head and chuckled.

“Yeh’ve found yer master, Lilt, yeh’ve found yer master. He beat ye fair.”

Lilt stood for a moment pulling at his red poll. Then he put back his head and laughed good naturedly. He advanced towards Mills and held out a great hand.

“Yeh beat me fair,” he laughed, as Newton took his hand. “Yeh beat me fair. I want yeh t’ show me how yeh did it. I want t’ try it on the Graham boys. *e-e-e-e-e-e-o-uch!!!*”

Lilt gave a yell of pain. He had tried his favourite game of squeezing a hand until its

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owner shouted for mercy, but had found his own horny palm caught in a grip that fairly made the bones crackle.

“Hully Gee! Let up,” he cried. “Yeh’d better show me that, too.”

Just then a horn blew at the house and Ridgeby, chuckling, turned away telling Newton to follow him. Lilt led the mare into the barn.

Chapter III

THEIR way led up through the barnyard, over the bars, and by a narrow path through a garden. They stopped at a bench by the door to wash. Ridgeby began to recount some feat of wrestling he had accomplished in his younger days. Newton pretended to pay him an interested attention, but in reality he was listening to the sounds that came from within; the rattle of a stove lid, mingled with the singing of a kettle, and a girl's voice humming "Bon Ami." After drying their hands and faces on a towel that hung from a nail above the bench Ridgeby opened the door. A savory odour was wafted out. They entered.

A little woman so bent she seemed almost a hunchback turned from the stove. Her features were plain and disfigured by a great mole on her left cheek. Newton forgot the homeliness of the face in the bright smile of hospitality that lighted it. She came forward

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nervously, wiping her hands on her calico apron.

“Step right in,” exclaimed Ridgeby cordially. “Em’ly, this is Newton Mills. Picked him up down th’ road a piece an’ brung ’im ’long. Thought I’d give ’im one taste o’ good eatin’!” The old man chuckled and bobbed his head.

“How-de-do!” she said, extending a thin hand which Newton shook as delicately as though it were china. “Never mind, Hiram; he allus wuz a flatt’rer ever since I married him.”

Newton started to excuse his unannounced intrusion when he was interrupted by a crumpling of paper from behind the stove. A withered old man clad in faded army blue shuffled forward; a grotesque figure. He was entirely bald and his gums were toothless.

“I’ll be Gummed ef ’taint th’ feller ’at stopped th’ ca-af,” he piped. “Gum yeh, I’m glad t’ see yeh. I’d a stopped a little longer, but th’ ca-af want willin’.” He spread his drooping

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lips in a grin. His speech was a high keyed drawl; his laugh a cackle.

“Ef they'd a tuk my *advice*—,” he began in a complaining voice.

Ridgeby hastily interrupted him.

“Newton Mills this's Reuben.”

Reuben grinned again and shuffling a step back made a stiff bow.

“Ef they'd a tuk my *advice*—”

The rest of the sentence was lost on Newton. A girl entered the room carrying two pans of newly moulded bread. The sleeves of her gingham dress were rolled up to the shoulder displaying two white, plump arms. The hummed notes of “Bon Ami” were still on her lips. Newton recognised her at once as the girl who had passed him with a companion during the afternoon. Ridgeby introduced her as his daughter, Sibley. The girl greeted him easily and simply and passing him went to the stove where she laid down the pans of bread and covered them with a cloth. Newton's eyes followed her. He was looking at her arms.

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They were round and white and delicately formed though strong. A dimple played about each elbow. Her figure was supple and exquisitely moulded and her step light and graceful. She raised her eyes and caught Newton staring at her. She neither blushed nor appeared confused but turned to her pans again. A heavy tramping at the door announced Lilt's entrance. Mrs. Ridgeby invited them to "set up." They took their places. The girl came forward rolling down her sleeves. Newton could not resist a last look. He was certain he had never seen prettier arms.

Mills started to take the vacant seat nearest to him but was stopped by a sudden exclamation from his hostess. There was a note of startled pain in it.

"No! No! Not there," she exclaimed hurriedly. "Here, sit here. That's Jim's place," she added.

Newton took the seat pointed out to him. He looked askance at the number of vacant chairs. Ridgeby mumbled an explanation.

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"We ust t' have children, yeh see, an' when they'uz took from us we kinder kept right on settin' their places to the table. It don't seem so lonesome like somehow."

"Ef they'd a tuk my *advice*," shrilled Reuben—

"They'd never had no children," Lilt interrupted.

Newton laughed.

The old man covered his confusion by muttering a blessing. At its end Lilt caught up his fork and hitching himself from his chair deftly speared a slice of bread from a platter in the center of the table. The meat and potatoes were started on their procession around the board. Newton was invited to "sail right in." All became at once too busy eating to waste breath in talking. Newton glanced around the room.

It was of low ceiling. The walls were washed a dark yellow. Two or three cheap prints were hung upon them. One was a woodcut of Daniel Webster; the other was a picture

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of Washington taking farewell of his troops. There was one rocking chair in the room. The rest were low, straight-backed, with heavy cane seats woven in wedge-shaped quarters.

But Newton could not keep his eyes from wandering back to the face of Sibley opposite him. There was a sweetness in her features that charmed him. Her complexion was perfect. The smooth whiteness of her skin set off the ruddy glow of her cheeks. Her eyes had the reflection of the summer sky in them. When she now and then reached him something he was surprised to see how soft and white were her hands. He marked the difference in her demeanour from that of the rest of the family; so easy was it compared with the noisy haste of Lilt; the untaught awkwardness of her mother and the childish clatter of the old man Reuben. She was perfect in her own deportment, and oblivious to the ignorance around her. Newton could not help admiring the girl.

“What d’yeh guess I caught this young man

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a doin'?" Ridgeby asked after he had worn off the sharp edge of his appetite.

"I hope 'twant nahthin' wrong," his wife returned.

Newton's exploit with Hi Simms was recounted. Mrs. Ridgeby looked at him admiringly.

The girl lifted her eye lashes and gave him a quick, sharp glance. It was the first sign of interest in him she had betrayed. Her glance was one of searching inquiry. She dropped her eyes again but said nothing.

"I hope yeh didn't get hurt much," exclaimed her mother. "I'd better put some 'intment on them cuts after supper. I 'uz a wonderin' what had happened to yeh."

"Ef folks ud take my *advice*," broke out Reuben—

"Pass the meat, Rube," Lilt exclaimed.

The old man fumbled with the plate and forgot to finish his sentence.

"Lilt didn't b'lieve he dun it till Mills threw him off'n his feet a couple o' times," chuckled

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Ridgeby, as he bobbed his head. "Dumb ef he didn't make Lilt think he want nahthin' but a baby."

"Did yeh get throwed, Lilt?" Mrs. Ridgeby asked.

Lilt filled his mouth to completion and gave it his entire attention.

"I hope yeh did," she continued. "Ef yeh'd only get throwed a few times yeh won't be a wantin' t' wras'le every body 'at comes on th' place."

"Ef folks ud take my *advice*," cackled Reuben, "they wouldn't wras'le."

"They wouldn't wras'le with Mills, nohow, would they Lilt?" chuckled Ridgeby.

Lilt swallowed enough of his mouthful to give room for a vindication.

"He's a pretty hard man, but I think I cud down him after I got ust t' him, a little," he mumbled.

"You men folks 'll get hurt ef you don't stop resking yer lim's so," exclaimed Mrs. Ridgeby.

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"They will ef they don't take my *advice*," Reuben put in.

Newton started to say something when he was interrupted by a cheery voice from the door behind him.

"They laid down jes' like little dogs an' died. Yes, they laid down jes' like little dogs an' died."

He turned his head. The little woman who had come up to him during the afternoon was standing in the doorway nodding her head. Her wrinkled face was smiling out from the depths of her great sun bonnet.

"They laid down jes' like little dogs an' died," she repeated. "Yes, they laid down jes' like little dogs an' died." She waved her hand and turned away. Sibley sprang from her chair and darted to the door.

"Oh, Aunt Bet," she called, "Come back and eat some supper with us. You haven't visited us in a long time."

"They laid down jes' like little dogs an' died," laughed back the old lady from the dis-

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tance. "Yes, they laid down jes' like little dogs an' died." She waved her hand again and disappeared down the lane.

The girl returned to her seat with a look of disappointment on her pretty face. Newton gave her a glance of inquiry.

"Oh, that is Crazy Bet," Sibley answered. "A shock unsettled her mind when she was a young woman. Her husband was suddenly killed by a fall from a hay loft and within the next week her three children died of diphtheria. Father and mother remember it. It was long before I was born. Ever since that time the poor woman has wandered about telling every one she meets that 'they laid down like little dogs and died.' She generally comes here quite often but I think she has taken it into her head to go to the poor farm again."

"Ef they'd take my *advice*," Reuben put in, "They'd send her to th' 'sylum."

"You must be a stranger in this section ef yeh don't know Crazy Bet," said his hostess.

"I am."

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"Where do yeh live when yer t' home," she continued with an idea of being sociable.

"Nowhere."

She looked startled.

"My, haint yeh got no home."

"Under my hat."

"Is that all yeh've got under yer hat," Lilt asked, staring hard at his plate.

"All except a few ideas about wrestling."

Ridgeby chuckled and bobbed his head. Lilt grinned sheepishly. Mrs. Ridgeby returned to the attack.

"Yeh haint a tramp, be yeh."

"Well a sort of a tramp, I suppose," Newton returned.

"But haint yeh got no kin," she persisted.

Sibley was looking at him. He hesitated a moment then answered slowly.

"We are all kin."

Sibley carried the conversation into other channels. Newton gave her a grateful glance.

The supper was soon finished. Lilt tilted back in his chair and began picking his teeth

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with his fork. Ridgeby followed his example. Sibley and her mother cleared away the dishes. A great cat came out from under the stove and rubbed against Newton's leg and then sprang purring into his lap. A fly lighted on Reuben's bald pate. He swung his hand testily about his ears.

"Gum a fly! Ef yeh'd take my *advice*—"

"Who, th' fly?" grinned Lilt.

The old man glared at him and snorted. Then he pulled a great red handkerchief from his pocket and spread it over his head. Leaning back against the wall he went to sleep.

Sibley went out of the kitchen and returned in a moment with three milk pails. She set them down on the floor and taking a pink sun bonnet from a peg on the wall put it on.

"I'm ready," she said.

Ridgeby and Lilt got up and taking each a pail went out of the door. The girl caught up the remaining pail and followed them.

"Do you help the men milk?" Newton asked in surprise as he sprang after her.

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"Why, certainly," she answered simply.

"Let me take your turn to-night."

"It is not necessary."

"Then get me another pail."

"You don't want to milk."

"But I do."

She threw that quick glance at him again.

"Can you milk?" she asked, stopping.

"Why, certainly."

She returned to the house and got another pail.

They walked side by side to the barn. Neither spoke. The night was inky dark save the little light the stars gave. The moon had not yet risen. The wind was blowing lightly. Its low complainings could be heard in the wheat field to the left of them. Its louder croonings sounded through the willow trees. An owl was hooting somewhere about them. They could hear the lowing of the cows in the barn.

Newton stole a glance at his companion. Her carriage was erect, the pose of her head com-

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manding, her step was strong but graceful. The girl puzzled him. She seemed to fit into her surroundings yet had no part with them.

They came to the barn. A pale light shone from out the doorway. Ridgeby had just lighted a lantern and hung it upon a nail. Lilt was closing the stanchions.

“Hullo!” he called, when he caught sight of Newton. “Have yeh come out t’ learn t’ milk?”

“No.”

“Yeh haint. What for, then?”

“To teach you.”

“How old was yeh when yeh learned to milk?”

“About three hours.”

It was Ridgeby’s turn to laugh. The girl was stroking the flank of a great roan cow, which lowed a welcome. Newton caught up a stool and began milking the cow nearest him. The others followed.

Tz-i-i-e-e-e-eng, tz-i-i-i-e-e-e-e-eng sang the white streams as they struck the tin, chang-

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ing to a quicker *zung*,—*zung* as the pails slowly filled. The cows chewed their cuds in silent contentment.

Newton might have milked faster but he could not forbear glancing now and then around the flank of his cow to catch a glimpse of Sibley. He could not see her face, only her hands. They were so soft and white it did not seem to him that they could be used to such rough labour. He wished that he had not offered to milk, but had only looked on. Then he could have watched the girl's face.

“I'll race yeh,” shouted Lilt.

“Here goes,” Newton answered.

“Milk dry, now,” cautioned Ridgeby.

The milk sang into the pails. There were sixteen cows. Newton won the race by one. Sibley was even with Lilt. She laughed lightly when she found they had each been beaten.

A short time after returning to the house Newton was shown to the room he was to occupy for the night. The ceiling was low and sloping on each side. There was a great

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four-post bed in the room with a mountainous feather tick. The bed was covered by a blue woven counterpane. A Bible and a hymn book rested on the low old-fashioned dresser, and the Lord's prayer, worked in red worsted, hung framed upon the wall.

He was tired and sank into a half doze as soon as he touched the pillow. Then he became dimly conscious of a howling and scratching beneath him, mingled with low oofs and smothered squeals. He heard a low shuffling in the kitchen and the door opening. There came a stampede beneath him. A moment later he heard the shuffling in the kitchen again and Reuben's voice drawling:

“Gum a hawg anyway. Ef they ud take my *advice*—”

Then he sank deeper into the feathers and to sleep.

Chapter IV

A TRUANT ray of sunshine playing at hide and seek with a shadow fell athwart Newton's face the next morning and awoke him. Out in the yard the cocks were welcoming the morning with clamorous matins. Their banded pæans mingled democratically with the squealings of hungry pigs and the morning songs of birds. The rattle of dishes in the kitchen warned Newton to be astir. He dressed hastily. The family was sitting down to breakfast when he joined it. Lilt had just surmounted a pile of cakes with a great lump of butter. He looked up and greeted Newton with a hearty, "Mornin'." Mrs. Ridgeby bustled forward with an anxious inquiry as to his night's rest. Ridgeby seemed to be out of sorts. There was a frown on his face and a pucker in his forehead. He growled a greeting at Newton. Reuben was rolling a potato from hand to hand and blowing on his fingers alternately.

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“Ef yeh’d a tuk my *advice*,” he was cackling, “Gummed but these ’taters are hot. Ef yeh’d a tuk my *advice*, yeh wouldn’t a et that las’ piece o’ pie las’ night.”

“Naw, he’d a left it for you,” Lilt put in.

Reuben turned on him testily. He dropped the potato and gave his fingers a parting blow.

“Ef yeh’d take my *advice*,” he shrilled. “Yeh’d talk less an’ say more.”

Sibley came in and took her place. She gave Newton a careless “good morning.” He looked at her narrowly. She seemed to him to be even prettier in the early morning than she was the night before. She was as fresh as the morning itself. A sunbeam broke through the window, mingled with her hair, and was lost. Newton tried to draw her into a conversation but succeeded indifferently. He found her, however, to be of nimble wit and in her words showed a familiarity with the world and its doings that surprised him. Ridgeby was grumbling to himself.

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"I never seen help s' scarce in all my born days," he mumbled tartly. "There hain't been hide ner hair of a han' through this section this summer, an' here 'tis way into harvestin' an' not a blade's cut. Hay's 'bout ruined, too. I swear ef things hain't jes' set crostwise with me this year. I never see such 'tarnal luck."

"Ef yeh'd a tuk my *advice*——," put in Reuben.

"Here's me laid up with th' Roomatis," continued Ridgeby, hastily, "An Em'ly's 'bout beat out with th' ager, an' Sibley ain't feelin' very well, an th' colt's got th' influenzy, th' hogs th' choleree an' th' chickens th' pips. Th' ole mare's clean gin out, hain't been no rain fer a month an' taxes is due."

"Ef yeh'd a tuk my *advice*——"

"Everything's goin' t' rack an' ruin," thundered Ridgeby, his voice rising with his anger. "We're gittin' porer every day an' th' rich is gettin' richer. We're bein' groun' down by domineerin' capitalists an' th' railroads 're

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eatin' us up. Th' gov'ment's in th' hands o' demegogues an' tricksters. We're bein' buried under a mountain o' taxes t' keep a lot o' lazy paupers doin' nahthin." Ridgeby stopped to catch his breath. Reuben thought he saw an opportunity.

"Ef yeh'd a tuk my *advice*——"

Ridgeby went on.

"Everything's taxed. Them buttons 'er taxed ten per cent. Them overall's taxed; so's them knives and forks, an th' table cloth too. Th' country's goin' t' th' everlastin' bow-wow-
o-o-o-o-o-o-

Ridgeby choked on the wow. Reuben seized the opportunity.

"Ef yeh'd a tuk my *advice*," he piped, "Yeh'd a stuck t' th' good ole Republican party, like I dun."

His remarks were lost. Ridgeby was getting black in the face. His wife sprang up and began pounding on his back with what strength there was in her thin, spare frame. Sibley offered water. Between this assistance and

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ferocious swallowings on the part of Ridgeby the truant mouthful was safely landed where it belonged.

"What's got int' yeh, anyway," his wife exclaimed with considerable spirit. "I haint seen yeh make sech a fool o' yerself in a long time. This's is what comes o' bein' in politicks an' runnin' fer office."

"Wow!" sighed Ridgeby, as he straightened up. "O-o-o-o-o-wow! Is it gone?"

"It's t' be hoped yer temper has," said his wife, smiling again.

A sheepish grin spread over the old man's face. Newton came to the rescue.

"Are you in need of a hand?" he asked.

"I be," Ridgeby answered, meekly.

"Will I do?"

"You?"

"Yes."

Again Newton caught the girl throwing that glance of inquiry at him.

"You don't look like a farm hand," said Ridgeby, doubtfully.

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"Lilt didn't think that I looked like a wrestler, either."

Ridgeby chuckled.

"Ther haint much money in it," he said. "Twenty dollars a' month an' foun'."

"Give me the found. I don't care for the twenty dollars," Newton replied.

Again came that quick glance from Sibley.

"Ef yeh'd take my *advice*," Reuben cackled.

"I'll try yeh," answered Ridgeby. "Ther haint much t' do this mornin'. Lilt's usin' the team down in th' south lot cult'vatin', but this afternoon yeh can take 'em an' begin cuttin' hay in th' secon' medder."

"Ef yeh'd take my *advice*," finished Reuben, "Yeh'd make him pay fer his board."

Breakfast was hurried through as rapidly as possible. Ridgeby and Lilt were on their way to the fields very soon. Newton stayed at the house and amused himself watching the girl. She worked rapidly, going from one task to another with the ease of habit. Now wiping the dishes, giving them a pol-

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ish to the tune of "Bon Ami," now out in the yard surrounded by a flock of cackling, clucking hens, that eagerly pecked the corn she threw them; now carrying a pail of skimmed milk to the calves. She swung the heavy pail with an ease which proved that strength was added to her beauty. The bend of her lithe body and the pose of her arm as she held it out for a balance were of classic grace. The morning's drudgery was soon finished.

Newton was drawing a bucket of water from the well when Sibley came out from the house and started with a sprightly step through the orchard.

"Where away, now," he called after her.

She paid no attention to him. He shrugged his shoulders and sprang after her. She stopped and turned on him. A princess, whose pale of royalty had been trespassed upon, could not have been more repellent. Mills' self-assurance deserted him. He involuntarily doffed his hat. He spoke humbly.

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"I beg your pardon if I have displeased you," he said slowly. "I know you better now."

The slight frown that had come over Sibley's face passed away.

"Am I forgiven?" he asked.

Newton asked it so half timidly, half mischievously, that Sibley smiled in spite of herself.

"Your forwardness is at least good-natured," she answered. "I will pass it."

"Then may I go with you? I want a walk, the morning is beautiful."

Sibley turned away.

"I am going to the Corners. There are several other directions in which you can walk."

"But I want to go this way."

"I cannot stop you, but you will find it a hard walk."

"Is it a long one?" he asked.

"A very long one, and a sharp tongue for a welcome."

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“And a sharper one for company. Well, I’m going.”

They came to the orchard fence. Newton was just about to offer his assistance when Sibley put her hand on the top rail and lightly vaulted it. Newton followed her. He had seen tom-boys leap fences, but this girl did not do it like a tom-boy. She did it like—Sibley.

“Is that the way you usually climb fences?” Newton asked quizzically.

“Yes, unless there is some one about whom I care for.”

She said it carelessly. Newton shrugged his shoulders.

“I am glad then that I am one of the favoured mortals whom you do not care for. I would not have missed that sight for anything. Will you leap the next fence, too?”

They walked some distance without speaking. The sun was flaming half way up the heavens. Swallows were dipping here and there. A flock of sparrows flew up, now and then, around them. They were walking

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through a pasture. The grass was closely cropped. Gopher holes honeycombed the ground. A snake wiggled out from under the girl's foot and disappeared in a hole. She carelessly watched its course. Newton cast about him for an excuse with which to start a conversation.

"What an odd old chap Reuben is," he said.

"Do you think so?" she answered vacantly.

"Who is he?" he asked, bluntly.

"Who is who?"

"Why, Reuben."

"Oh, were you talking about him? Yes, he is."

"He is what?"

"Didn't you say that he was odd? I was agreeing with you."

"Oh."

Another silence.

"Well, who is Reuben," he asked again.

"A relative?"

"No, I don't know who he is," Sibley answered carelessly.

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“ You don't know who he is? ” Newton replied, puzzled. “ That's queer.”

“ Is it? ”

Sibley's mind seemed to be wandering away somewhere. Then she came a little more to herself.

“ Reuben came to the door one day about six years ago and asked to be allowed to stay over night. Up to this time he has neglected to go away.”

Just then they came to another fence. Sibley did not vault it, but walked along its bush-lined sides until she came to a pair of bars. She let them down and passed through.

“ I seem to be growing in your estimation,” Newton said, as he replaced the bars.

Sibley laughed, but did not reply. They soon came within sight of the little red store. He wondered if the girl would say anything about his encounter with Hi Simms now that they were on the scene of it. Instead, she began humming “ Bon Ami.”

They passed around the corner of the store

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and went in by the little door in front. Miss Latey was sitting in her accustomed place by the sugar barrel. She gave Newton a sharp glance as they entered.

“Good morning, Miss Latey,” Sibley said pleasantly.

Miss Latey snapped her teeth tightly together and glared at her customers.

“Oh, it's you, be it? What d'yeh want?”

“A pound of citron, if you please,” Sibley answered.

“Huh!” sniffed the old lady, as she got up. “It's a wonder 'at Hiram Ridgeby's able t' buy fancy stuff with s' many paupers in th' house. No wonder he can't pay intrust.”

Newton was looking at Sibley. He saw the red of her cheeks deepen and spread over her face until it burned like fire. He saw her white teeth sink into her lips as though they would bite through them.

“Has Ridgeby picked up any more paupers lately?” continued the old lady, as she weighed out the citron.

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"He picked me up last night," Newton broke in sharply. "I am to work for my board and clothes."

Miss Latey looked at him over her glasses.

"My land," she exclaimed. "Ef it aint that tramp 'at 'uz fightin' with Hi Simms las' night. Well, ef I 'uz Hiram Ridgeby I'd send *you* postin' 'fore yeh had time t' steal anything."

Newton burst into a boisterous laugh. Under cover of it Sibley caught up her purchase and darted out the door. Newton followed her more slowly and saw her speeding across the fields in a walk that was almost a run. He overtook her. He was still laughing. When he came along side her Sibley turned her head.

"What an old vixen," laughed Newton. "She could break up that temper of her's into little pieces and sell them for needles. Who is she, Miss Ridgeby?"

Newton caught sight of Sibley's face. Tears

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were stealing out of her eyes and staining her cheeks. He was sobered at once.

“Why, Miss Ridgeby——,” he began.

“Don't call me that,” she cried. “I'm not Miss Ridgeby. I'm only what Miss Latey called me, a pauper, one of Hiram Ridgeby's stray cattle. I ought to be in the poor house or farmed out for my board.”

The tears came faster, and she spoke feverishly. Newton looked at her in amazement. The girl sped on. She seemed to want to escape him. He looked into her face again. All the pride that had been in her carriage had melted. She seemed to him now as a child. He forgot for the moment that she was a woman. He reached out and caught her hand. She gave a start and turned a frightened face towards him, but did not draw her hand away. There was something in the expression on his face that reassured her. She was in a mood in which a woman craves sympathy. The highly-keyed tension of her nerves made her fairly clairvoyant. They told her that she had found

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a friend. They were standing beneath a great tree. He pulled her down on one of the roots.

"Tell me about it," he commanded.

"There isn't very much to tell," she replied, borne down by his tone. "I was left, when a baby, on Hiram Ridgeby's doorstep. The only father and mother I ever knew took me in and kept me. The neighbours wanted me taken to the poor house, but they would not have it that way and I was brought up as if I were a daughter. How good they have been to me. Father even mortgaged the farm that I might have an education. Why, I was at Vassar two years. It was intended that I should finish the course, but father couldn't raise the money without increasing the mortgage and I wouldn't let him do that. They have done everything in the world for me, but I have no right to any of it. I suppose it is that I may not forget that fact and become ungrateful that I have to stand such slurs as these, but, oh, how they hurt me."

Newton smiled at her.

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“Why do you mind the words of a sour-tongued old woman whose temper has fermented and must blow up once in so often. The idea of calling you a pauper because Hiram Ridgeby was lucky enough to have you left on his doorstep. My home had a doorstep. I wish you had been left on that. Perhaps, then——”

Newton's voice sank. Then he checked himself. He looked away off towards the south and for a moment watched a man and a team crawling along the summit of the ridge. Even that far away he could see that it was Ridgeby.

“Perhaps then—Ridgeby and his wife would not be the happy couple they are now,” he finished.

“Look!” he said, pointing towards the ridge. “There's the old man working away, harder perhaps than he deserves, but you know how cheerfully he does it. But don't you know that you have lightened his load rather than increased it. Those furrows would seem twice as long were it not for the face he sees at the

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end of each one of them. The mud would cling twice as heavily about his great boots were it not for the lightness in his heart that you have put there. When we passed the house yesterday we heard you singing. Could you have heard the swell of loving pride that came into his voice when he said, 'That's Sibley Ann,' you would never let such thoughts bother you again."

She was looking toward the ground. Her hand supported her chin. She had stopped crying. Newton lightened his tone.

"How can you be a pauper with riches of beauty," he exclaimed.

"Beauty is only skin deep at the best," she returned.

"Not if it goes way through to the heart."

She looked up at him.

"I know I'm foolish, but——"

"It's the province of a girl to be foolish," Newton finished.

A smile crept over her face.

"But I have been to Vassar. Is that not

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supposed to lift one above the right to be foolish? But come, we must get back to the house."

Newton would have liked to stay longer, but he followed her. They came to the orchard fence.

"Well," he said, "What are you going to do about the fence this time?"

She looked him straight in the eyes a moment. A quizzical smile came over her face, then she held out her hand.

"I think that I will be a Vassar girl again for a moment. You may help me over."

Chapter V

AFTER dinner Newton hitched the team to the mower and started for the hay field. He drove through a winding lane in which the calves were sporting, skirting an orchard on one side, and on the other a wheat field, whose golden expanse, uniting with others, stretched out until, sinking down a swale, it became lost to sight. The sun, falling on the bending heads, was reflected back in a golden sparkle. He let down a pair of bars, drove through a pasture and into the field of waving timothy.

He stopped his horses a moment and looked around him. The tufted grass was bowing salutes to the sun all about him. It swayed and bent and tossed and became erect again as the wind whispered over it, sending up a breath of perfume that Newton drank in with a sigh. Grasshoppers everywhere leaped from stalk to stalk and filled the air with their grating song. One of them lighted on his hand. He aroused

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himself from the half reverie into which he had fallen and flicked it off. He drew up the lines, let down the bar and called to his horses. They strained against the collars, the knives creaked and crashed and the serried ranks of hay began to prostrate themselves as Oriental slaves at the approach of a master. The rattle of the knives as he drove round and round the field became monotonous after awhile. It drowned out all other sounds and roared in his ears until he scarcely heard it. Then he fell to musing of Sibley.

The girl was an enigma to him. Here was a woman to whom had been given advantages far beyond those usual to her lot, a girl cultured, refined, with a mind broadened by contact with the world, educated at a college noted for its culture, accomplished, beautiful. All this she was, yet here he found her on an Iowa farm, milking the cows, feeding the calves, engaged in all the rough household duties, taking her full share in the rude battle for existence, and doing it all as though she dreamed of

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nothing better. There was nothing in her bearing to reveal that she considered herself better than her surroundings, no attempt to hold herself above it. If she longed for something better, if her mind revolted at the crude monotony around her, if she was filled with ambitions beyond her every day life it was nowhere manifested. Still her superiority was everywhere apparent. Her face and form showed a gentle parentage shining through the mystery of her birth. There was an unconscious grace in her bearing, a quiet queenliness in her address, which in spite of herself marked her as above her condition.

Sibley was an example of that ever increasing type, the educated farmer's daughter, the girl for whom the old, bent, gnarled, work-withered mothers and fathers have toiled year in and year out, knowing not the meaning of rest, narrowing as the seasons pass, growing farther and farther away from that great world that lies somewhere over beyond the swells. When the children grow up and become able

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to take the plow from the hand of the father and the multitudinous cares of the household from the shoulders of the mother the parents shut their eyes to the rest that is offered them. They slave harder yet, scrimp closer than before, add to the mortgage on the farm, that the children may have an education. It is their ambition, their dream. The children go away to school. The boys stay away. The glamour of the world blinds them. Ambitious dreams weave delusions in their minds, and they turn their backs on the old farm and go out into the hurly-burly. Not so the girl. She goes back to mother and father, she takes up her duties again and finds her simple pleasures among them. So it was with Sibley.

The mower rattled on and the horses strained on. The steam was rising in clouds from their flanks. The sun was beating down with a withering heat. The horizon seemed dancing, so tremulous was the air. Newton felt as if he were burning up as he guided the horses round and round the field. The heat seemed to find its

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way into his blood and set it boiling. His face and hands were blistering and his shoulders felt on fire. The straw hat he had borrowed from Lilt offered but small protection and he feared he would faint.

He cast longing eyes toward the west. The sun crawled along. He had not been in the field more than two hours and already it seemed that the heat must overcome him. He happened to look toward the house. He caught sight of a girl coming down through the pasture carrying a jug. As he came around the circuit again she leaped the fence and called to him. It was Sibley. He stopped his horses.

"I have brought you down something to drink," she said, as she came up to him. "You would better stop and rest for a few moments. You are not seasoned to the heat yet. It is terrible out here in the fields. I don't see how the men stand it. Are you thirsty?"

"I'm as dry as a bone," Newton said, gratefully, as he headed his horses toward a tree that grew in a fence corner. He drew up in the

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shade and dismounted. She handed him the jug. He put his thumb through the handle and swinging it over his elbow pressed it to his lips.

"Ah, swizzle," he said, smacking his lips. Then he took another draught.

Sibley stood with her arms akimbo smiling at him. Her face, in the depths of her sunbonnet, looked bewitching. Her rounded arms shone through her thin sleeves, her dress open at the neck, displayed a full, white throat.

"It was very kind of you to remember me," Newton said, looking at her. "I was nearly dying from thirst."

"I always take the men something cool to drink in the afternoon," she replied.

The reply disappointed him.

Sibley went up to the horses and began stroking their heads. Newton threw himself down in the shade.

"I have been thinking about you all the afternoon, Miss Ridgeby," he said, after a minute.

"Father would probably prefer you to think

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about your work," she returned, without looking at him.

Newton was taken back, but he did not yield the field.

"You are an enigma to me," he continued. "I can't make you out at all."

"What is the matter. I can probably explain it," she replied.

Newton reached for a blade of timothy and twirled it in his fingers.

"Well," he said slowly, "You have told me of the advantages you have enjoyed, of your college education and all, and yet here you are on this farm doing the rough work as though you cared for nothing better. You are like the queen in the guise of a kitchen maid."

"Is an education supposed to unfit one for the position of kitchen maid?" she asked without turning toward him.

"No, but it is likely to raise one above it, and make one dissatisfied with it."

"You are college bred, are you not?" she asked, turning suddenly toward him.

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"Yes," he admitted, after an instant's hesitation.

"You have had even greater advantages than I?"

"Perhaps."

"Yet here you are working on a farm for twenty dollars a month and found." Sibley turned to the horses again.

"I beg your pardon," Newton added. "Only for found. There may be some good reason for that."

"Not for your health, anyway," Sibley laughed.

"There are a good many kinds of health." Newton replied slowly.

Sibley left the horses and went toward him. Her face became grave. There was a look of intenseness in her blue eyes.

"If there is reason for your doing as you do," she said, "Is there not reason for me? What right have I to do anything else than what I do, or to be anything else than what I am. I have no right even to these. Every-

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thing I am or ever will be is owing to those whom by their kindness I can call parents. Why should I allow their kindnesses to raise me above them? It is for me to be what they are, to think as they think, to work as they work, anything else would be treason. It is for me to remember the debt I owe and to repay it as far as may lie in my power. It is for me to sacrifice myself to any extent to aid them, and may I die before I see the day that I shall refuse to do it. What am I? Why I may even be—”

She checked herself, and began winking her eyes to keep back the tears.

“I don't know what I am.”

“And should not care,” said Newton. “Look into the glass. Does that not tell enough?”

“Tell that to a silly girl,” said Sibley.

“There seems to be none here to whom to tell it,” he answered meekly.

Sibley smiled again.

“You are bound to compliment me, but I am proof against flattery.”

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“Or surfeited with it, which?”

“A girl never is that,” she replied with a laugh. “She may be unaffected by flattery, but she never tires of it. But you would better go to work again. Here,” she cried suddenly, as from an inspiration, “you stay here and I will go around two or three times. I haven’t driven a machine for two years.”

She sprang on the iron seat and started the horses on the circuit. Newton lay back in the shade and watched her as the falling timothy bent before her. She sat erect and guided the horses with a rare skill.

A road skirted one side of the field. Newton’s eyes turning for a instant from Sibley’s graceful figure, looked up it. The wind rising a little was puffing up the dust in eddies. Far up the road he saw a man on horseback approaching. Sibley was almost out of sight at the far end of the field so he watched him. The horse was in harness and the tugs were flapping. The man was mounted sideways. As he came nearer Newton recognised him as the

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one he had seen the day before with Sibley. He was broad shouldered and muscular. His checked shirt was open at the throat showing a strong chest. His feet were thrust into coarse boots. He wore his great straw hat in rather a rakish fashion. The sun-burned features it shadowed were heavy and coarse though well formed, and his eyes had an expression of uncouth hardness in them. Sibley was coming around by the tree. The man checked his horse.

“Hello Sib!” he called.

Sibley stopped the horses and looked toward him.

“Good afternoon, Abner,” she answered quietly.

“I ’uz jes’ goin’ over t’ your place. Got t’ borryer a scythe if Ridgeby’s willin’. Jim jes broke th’ one he’s usin’. It’s a day’s grindin’ t’ get it int’ shape agen. How’s th’ folks?”

“They are well. How is your mother, Abner?” Sibley returned as she dismounted.

“The ole lady’s lively ’nuff. Lize guessed

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she'd come over this aft'noon, but Al's wife dropped in fer th' day an' she had t' give it up. She's darned sorry too. Got a new han' t' help Lilt?"

"Yes. Mr. Hawkins this is Newton Mills."

"How'd do Newt. Where'd yeh come from?"

Newton looked into Sibley's face. It expressed nothing. He pulled another blade of grass and began to chew it.

"I say, where d' yeh come from?" Abner repeated roughly.

Newton turned toward him coolly.

"From Heaven, originally, I understand."

"The Hell yeh did?"

Again Newton looked at Sibley. Her face was as impassive as before.

"If I were you," Newton said slowly, "I would be a little more careful what language I used in the presence of a lady."

Abner drew his horse closer to the fence and rested his feet on the top rail.

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“Haw! Haw! Haw!” he laughed, “Well, I guess Sib’s used t’ me, aint yeh Sib? I’d advize you, though, not t’ be givin’ lessons in ettiket t’ yer betters.”

“I never do,” Newton answered, looking carelessly away across the field.

“Yeh was jes’ tryin’ ’t.”

“Not to my betters.”

Abner pushed his hat further back on his head. The coarseness of his face became more prominent. He was speechless for a moment. Newton lay still watching Sibley and carelessly chewing a blade of timothy.

Hawkins burst out at last.

“Ef Sib want here I’d teach yeh some manners.”

“If you will swear before a woman I should think you would fight before her,” Newton replied, throwing away the blade of grass.

“Why damn you—,” began Abner.

Newton sprang from the ground and started for the fence. Abner threw himself from his horse and advanced to meet him. Sibley was

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the only calm one. She stepped in front of Newton and stopped him.

“My ears do not need a protector,” she said quietly. “As Abner says I am indeed used to him. There is the team, you had better go back to your work.”

Newton frowned toward Abner, then without a word turned to the machine. As he mounted it Abner broke out in a jeering laugh.

“Yeh scart easy.”

In an instant the rattle of the knives drowned the rest of his words. Newton did not venture to look back. When he came around again he saw Abner riding toward the house. Sibley was walking by his side. On the next round they had disappeared.

After supper Newton helped Lilt do up the chores. When he went into the house after the milk pails he found Abner there. Sibley was just leading him into the little parlor. He was wearing the same rough clothes he had worn in the afternoon. As Newton saw the door

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close behind them he felt a strange feeling of dissatisfaction in his heart. A sort of trembling came over his limbs, a kind of vague disappointment. He pretended to himself that it was not there.

He and Lilt did the milking alone that night.

"Who's this Abner Hawkins?" Newton asked, with assumed carelessness, as he hung a lantern on a peg.

"He's George Hawkins's son," Lilt answered, as he began closing the stanchions. "Yeh want t' look out for him a little. He's a mean cuss. Th' ole man has means an' it kind o' sets Abner up. It'll all go t' Ab. He'll be th' bes' fixed man in th' county when th' ole man dies. They say 'at George Hawkins owns half th' county, an's got a mor'gage on t'other half. He's a mean scrimpy critter an' Ab. takes right after him. He's a chip off th' ole block."

"Is he a friend of Miss Ridgeby's?" Newton asked, as he put a stool by the side of a great roan cow and sat down.

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“ Well, I shud say so. They're goin' t' be married in th' spring.”

“ Oh! ”

And then the milk began to sing in the pails.

Chapter VI

BEFORE he had noticed the quick passage of time Newton had been a month at the farm. His status in the family was quickly determined. Ridgeby declared him to be a jewel. Lilt admitted that he could farm as well as he could wrestle. Reuben decided that he earned his board. Mrs. Ridgeby had ceased to inquire into his antecedents.

While his cordial reception into the family was most pleasing to Newton there was one member of it whose coldness offset in his mind the warm heartedness of all the others. Upon his advent at the farm Sibley had plainly been suspicious of him. Newton was sure he had conquered her suspicions. On two occasions she had given him deep insights into her heart. These revelations seemed to him to warrant a pledge of friendship. For a time he thought she was his friend. For two weeks she threw aside the cool reserve in which she had at first masked herself and had treated him with a

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frank kindness. They had long talks together during the short evenings. Sometimes it was out under the walnuts where the tree toads were singing for rain, or walking down the road in the moonlight. Literature, art, religion were the subjects that engrossed them. Newton found the girl's mind to be better informed on many of these subjects than his own. Her tastes were exquisite, her ideas well developed, her opinions sharply defined. Nor did he find her inclined toward the pedantry of the blue stocking. She was always ready to stop a discussion for a frolic and was inclined to season an argument with a jest.

During those first days Newton found the girl to be exerting an influence over him beyond what he had thought possible. He put the thought away from him, he even laughed at it, but he caught himself listening to the meadow larks and likening their song to Sibley's. He came upon a blue-bell in the pasture one day and he stopped to notice that its colour was that of Sibley's eyes. He called himself a fool and

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stepped upon the blue-bell but before he could climb the fence he had gone back and raised the bruised flower from the dust and—kissed it. Then he called himself a fool again. He found himself looking forward all through the day to that one short hour's conversation with Sibley in the evening. It recompensed him for the labour and sweat of the day. But an end came to this. Abner Hawkins' visits had ceased for awhile. Newton had almost forgotten that such a person had existence. Abner had been away somewhere, Lilt said. "Puttin' th' screws on a mor'gage summers, most likely!" But he came back again. Newton found that he had no place with Sibley any longer. Their evening talks ended. She no longer came out to the fields in the afternoons with a cooling draught. Old Reuben instead, limped out with it. It often lay untasted in the shade. Sibley's manner toward Newton changed as well. The old coldness came into her manner again. Then Newton found himself to be miserable. The farm was no longer

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pleasant. The sun seemed hotter and there were no pleasant anticipations to make him forget it. The clatter of the mower became more deafening and there was no song in his ears to drown it. He would not then admit that he was coming to love Sibley, but he knew he was beginning to hate Abner Hawkins. Then he thought that he hated Sibley because she was going to marry him. The thought of this marriage had become a bitter one. Each day he found himself able to consider it less calmly. He made a wry face over it every time he thought of it.

He finally became so impatient with himself that he decided to leave the farm. Why? Because he was in love with Sibley Ridgeby and she was going to marry another man. Pshaw! but he was not in love with Sibley Ridgeby and so far as he was concerned she could marry anyone she pleased. Then why should he leave the farm? He decided that this was reasoning somewhat in a circle and told himself again that he was a fool.

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Why was Sibley Ridgeby going to marry Abner Hawkins? The rattle of the mower shrieked the question in his ears all day long. The robins chirped it. The gophers whistled it. Why was Sibley Ridgeby going to marry Abner Hawkins? Because she loved him, seemed the rational answer. But was it true in this case? Did Sibley Ridgeby love Abner Hawkins? Newton's mind rebelled at the thought. Could she, a girl, educated, cultured, refined, gifted with the thousand natural graces that make a woman beautiful, could she conceive an affection for a brute like Abner Hawkins, coarse, illiterate, grasping, selfish, lacking in all that crude nobility which springs naturally from the soil and is nurtured by the sunshine. No, a thousand times, No.

Now and then since their old associations had been broken off Newton had come upon Sibley at times in a musing fit. He had then seen an expression flit over her face like a cloud of hopelessness, a pained look of dread that could not but associate itself in Newton's mind

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with Abner Hawkins and her betrothal. He felt someway that if he could but again get her to open her heart to him as she had once done that the riddle would be read him. But he asked himself again what mattered it to him. He was mowing with a scythe in a fence corner when the thought came to him. He stopped and resting the handle upon the ground took the stone from his pocket and began to whet the blade. He asked himself the question twice. He stopped and looked away across the fields to where a threshing machine was booming. The sound seemed to him to be calling for an answer to his question. He took off his hat and looked up at the sun.

“Because I love her,” he said aloud.

Then he began to swing his scythe lustily.

Newton was slower than usual over his chores that night and he stopped at times and absent-mindedly gazed at the lantern as if its pale rays could light the mental darkness he found himself in. He loved. Why deny it? No, he did not deny it. He loved. He re-

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peated the words over and over again to himself as if to become used to them. He loved. What then? He loved a girl who was betrothed. Did it not follow that he loved hopelessly? Would it not be better for him to go away from his love, or, taking it with him, to stifle it in new impressions? No, he did not want to stifle it. His love was his. He gloried in it. It had filled his heart. It had become a part of himself. Though it might be hopeless; still it was love, But was it hopeless? His reason answered Yes. His heart urged, No.

He finished his chores. He went out of the barn and unheeding Lilt's shouted request from the stables below, to "wait a bit," he started toward the fence and leaping it turned down the lane. He was pulling through his hand a bit of straw from the bedding he had thrown down for the horses. Through his head he was pulling and hauling the questions that troubled him.

Something made him look up. Before him, crouching in the grass below the walnut trees

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was Sibley. A locust was singing shrilly in the leaves above her and she was looking up toward it vacantly. The white moonlight fell full upon her face and threw a pallor over it save where the red of her lips blushed out. Newton stopped and caught his breath. That divinity he thought, his divinity, to be given over to the arms of Abner Hawkins? Sibley heard his step and turned toward him. A flush overspread her face. She got up without a word and turned toward the house.

Newton took a step forward.

“Sibley.”

She turned toward him half helplessly. He had never spoken to her so before. There was a mingled command and entreaty in his voice. It was the first time he had spoken that name except in a whisper to himself. The boldness with which the word came to his lips startled him.

“Come for a walk.”

Sibley hesitated. That wistful expression flitted across her face again.

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“Come.”

She sighed, half turned her head away, then as though following a volition not her own she came out the gate and silently took his arm. He turned down the lane and followed it until it led them out into the main travelled road.

The road wound its dusty length out before them. The moon light threw a certain uncanny spell over it. The winds were whispering weird tales to the corn fields which shivered restlessly. On either hand the rag weeds huddled closely to the sturdier sun flowers which bowed assent. Grim, uncertain shadows reached out their arms to gather in the light. The moon beams seemed to flee from them. The spell of the evening threw its influence over Sibley and Newton. The silence about them laid its heavy fingers on their lips and bade them be still. They walked slowly up the road without speaking. Now and then Newton stole a look at Sibley. Her head was bent and she seemed gazing intently at her feet as al-

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ternately they were pushed out from the bottom of her dress. She hung heavily upon his arm.

"I wonder where this road leads to?" Newton said after a time. "Where did it lead from? Where does it end?"

Sibley shook her head

"It leads out of darkness, and it leads on into darkness," she said musingly.

"How much then it is like life." Newton replied. "That comes out from a cloud and it disappears again into a cloud."

"There is one great difference though."

"What is that?"

"It has no moon." Sibley's voice was dispirited.

"Ah, but there is a mightier light given to brighten it," Newton said eagerly.

"What is that?"

"Love."

The hand on Newton's arm trembled. Sibley did not answer for a moment.

"Perhaps," she said hesitatingly. "But so

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often dark clouds hang over it and the light cannot shine through."

"Or, again, if it does shine through it often casts shadows that are worse than the darkness itself."

Sibley looked up at him quickly as though she would read his meaning in his eyes. They were looking down at her reproachfully. Her own fell again. She did not reply.

"I wonder which is better," Newton said after awhile. "To live in the darkness without the light, or in the shadow that the light casts."

She shook her head slowly. She spoke with a half sigh.

"I do not know. We do not have the choosing. We must take the darkness, the shadow, or the light as fate places us, it seems. We have as little control over that light as we have over the moon."

"Perhaps," Newton replied hastily. "But even though the shadow be cast over us we need not always stay within it. Sometimes we can break out into the full sunshine."

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“ But perhaps fate binds us hand and foot and casts us in the shadow. Then we cannot escape from it.”

“ I do not believe in such a fate.”

“ Perhaps then duty holds one there.”

“ It could not be a duty.”

“ I wish I could think so.”

The words came whispered from Sibley's lips like the outbreakings of a prayer. She had not meant to utter them audibly. She trembled when she heard herself speak them. An agony had seized on her heart and the words were the cry her heart sent up. She flushed and looked toward the ground.

Newton's heart leaped. He stopped and turned toward her. He spoke huskily.

“ Where are you Sibley?” he asked. “ In the sunshine or in the shadow?”

She could not answer.

“ You are in the shadow,” he cried. “ It must be so. I cannot think it otherwise. What is it that keeps you there?”

His voice was low and pleading. The pent

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up love in his heart was struggling for freedom that it might pour itself out as a libation at her feet. Newton tried to hold it back but it had gained too great a power.

“Answer me, Sibley,” he cried. “For Heaven’s sake answer me. You must know that I—.”

Sibley shivered. She turned a white, agonised face toward him. She clutched harder at his arm.

‘Don’t!’ she cried.

She stood still trembling. They had just reached the top of a swell. At their feet the road plunged down into a swale. A great shadow fell over it. A dank air rose from out it. Sibley turned away.

“Let us go back,” she said. “I am almost afraid of the shadow.

They walked back to the house in silence.

Chapter VII

MISS LATEY was sitting in her accustomed place by the sugar barrel from whence she could see up and down the road. As usual, also, she was knitting. Some influence seemed to soften her that afternoon. Perhaps it was the delicate scent of ripening hay that was wafted through the open door, or the spell of summer witchery that hung over the prairie. The hard lines about her mouth slowly softened and the light of ill-temper died out of her eyes. In place of the frown that hung almost perpetually over her countenance there came a look of sadful yearning. The shrunken breast heaved and a sigh broke from between her half parted lips. She stopped knitting and resting her hands in her lap gazed vacantly up the dusty road where the sunlight was chasing the shadows. Something dimmed her eyes for she brushed her faded hands across them. Then, as though the spell about her had taken full possession of her

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soul and had broken through the ice that had so long crusted over her heart, she suddenly tossed her apron over her head, and rocking to and fro burst into a fit of weeping. Her spare frame seemed almost to be rended by the sobs that shook it. In a moment she was quieter, but the tears continued to trickle through her fingers and dampen her dress.

She was still sobbing gently when a buxom figure darkened the doorway. It was Amanda Speers. She was a great coarse woman clad in a fantastic mixture of male and female attire. A big yellow sun bonnet partially hid her masculine features, a ragged coat covered the upper part of her body, while her lower limbs were hidden by a short calico skirt from which protruded a pair of heavy plow boots.

A coarse leer spread itself over her face as she beheld the little store keeper sobbing in her chair. She set the big market basket she was carrying on the counter.

“How'de, Miss Latey,” she jeered, “Lover gone back on yeh?”

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The old lady had been so carried away by her melting passions that she had been unaware of the entrance of Mrs. Speers. A shiver ran over her as the harsh voice broke in on her grief. In a trice the fountains of her heart were frozen up again and the softening influence was chased away. When, a moment later, she pulled down the apron from her face there was only a suspicious redness around her eyes to betray her tears.

There was something in the sneer on the face of the woman before her that set her peppery nature on fire. The hot blood rushed to her face, her gray eyes flashed ominously and the corners of her mouth drew down in a hard look of hate. For an instant she glared at Mrs. Speers. Then she sprang from her chair with a shriek.

“Mandy Speers yeh take 'at ole basket of yourn an' git out' at door jes' as lively as yer lumberin' ole bones'll let yeh, an' don't yeh never let me see yer ugly face round here again or I'll scratch yer eyes out.” She advanced threateningly upon her caller.

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The red face beneath the sunbonnet turned fairly pale. Mrs. Speers had once bested one of her hired men in a pitched battle, but there was something over-awing in the wrath of the little woman before her. She caught up her basket and retreated to the door. Miss Latey followed her to the very sill and pushed her across the threshold. Mrs. Speers was bubbling over with anger, but it was not until she reached the turnpike that it found vent. Then turning she shook her great fist at the wrathful figure in the doorway and hurled back a torrent of profanity.

Miss Latey's spare form was still trembling with fury when Ridgeby came around from behind the store. He hesitated as he looked at the wrathful figure before him and then at the retreating form of Mrs. Speers, who at every step turned back to shake her fist at the little red store. Ridgeby wanted to laugh but did not dare.

"Em'ly wants a little tea, Miss Latey," he said in a halting voice after a moment. "Guess two bits worth 'll be 'nuff."

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"Haint sellin' no tea," snapped Miss Latey, without taking her eyes from her vanishing enemy.

"But Em'ly wants it mighty bad," went on the old man gently. "She's got Elder Simmons up 'air t' supper an's jes' seen she haint got a mite o' tea in th' hull house."

"Haint got no tea t' sell," she replied sharply.

"Why, whats yer tea fer, Miss Latey, ef taint t' sell?" urged Ridgeby. "Em'ly wants 'at tea mighty bad an' she wont feel right ef she don't get it."

"I guess my tea's my own, leastwise it's paid fer, which is more'n c'n be said 'bout a hull lot o' things yeh've got up t' yer house, an' I guess I don't need t' sell it ef I don't want t'."

"But th' Elder—"

"What do I care for th' Elder," snapped the old woman. "Let th' Elder drink water. I haint goin' t' sell yeh no tea, Hiram Ridgeby, so yeh might as well be gettin' back home 'fore th' Elder gits lonesome."

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A shade of irritation passed over Ridgeby's face.

"Don't seem t' me yeh'r actin' jes' right," he said, half timidly. "Seems t' me like yeh'd orter be more 'commodating."

"Huh! Yeh seem t' think I'm runnin' this store jes' t' 'commodate folks."

A flash came into Ridgeby's eyes.

"I think yeh'r showin' a mighty mean spirit th' way yeh'r actin', that's what I think," he said, hastily turning away.

The old lady's form suddenly stiffened. The angles of her body became more pronounced; the sharpness of her features more deeply cut. A lustre blazed in her eyes. She looked almost like a snake coiled ready to launch its venom. She gave utterance to a quick exclamation that caused Ridgeby to turn back.

"Well, Hiram Ridgeby," she cried sharply. "Yeh'r a nice one t' talk about a mean spirit I must say, you who turned yer oldest son out o' th' house t' die. You who shut yeh'r doors 'gainst yer own flesh an' blood. Oh, some of

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us haint forgot 'at while yeh fill yer house full o' paupers there want room in it for them 'at God sent yeh. Then yeh come n' tell a lone woman she shows a mean spirit. Mean spirit Huh!"

With that Miss Latey turned and slammed the door behind her and although several of the neighbours came during the afternoon and knocked and knocked at the little red store they received no answer and returned home wondering.

Ridgeby looked blankly at the wall. He stood stiffly as though his muscles had been turned to stone. His jaws had fallen upon his chest. A glassy look came into his eyes. He drew his breath with a deep suspiration, then seemed to cease breathing. A look of awful agony swept over his face. Turning he shuffled away across the fields with his eyes bent upon the ground. The meadow larks were piping all around him but he did not seem to hear them. Now and then a covey of quail would start from his feet and whirr whistling away, or a flock of crows, frightened by his near ap-

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proach would wing their flight out of danger. But these, with all the other sights and sounds of nature's golden prime of summer were lost upon him.

Out in the back meadow Newton and Lilt were at work cocking hay. The sun beat down with a blinding glare. The perspiration was streaming off them. Every now and then one of them would stop for a moment and pulling off his great straw hat would fan his flushed face. The ripened hay sent up a redolent fragrance that the men drew in with deep breaths. A road skirted one side of the field. Now and then Lilt would call out cheerily as some acquaintance passed. Jake Anson went by in a wagon when they were near the line fence and stopped for a moment's conversation. When he had gone on Lilt proposed a rest. They threw themselves down in the shade of the cock they were building. Each gave vent to an involuntary sigh of satisfaction. Lilt locked his hands behind his head and stretched himself out at length.

“I don't believe I'm much more on bein'

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lazy 'un other people," he said half apologetically. " But sence I've been with Ridgeby I've learned 'at there's somepin t' get out of a farm 'sides work an' crops. There haint nobody any sprier 'un Ridgeby on work for all of his years. He can shock uz many oats in a day now as two thirds o' th' men in th' country. But he has a way o' stoppin' now an' then when things haint pushin' too much an' lookin' around t' see ef he can't find somepin purty handy. Why th' ole man'll stop his plow in a furrow t' watch a woodpecker, an' I've seen him set on th' handles fer half an hour lookin' at a flock o' black birds kitin' about over head. He allus looks kinder sheepish ef yeh catch him at it an' tells yeh he jes' stopped a minnit t' breathe th' horses. Someway I'm kinder gettin' int' th' habit m'self. I haint much on po'try an' such, but seems t' me that there haint nothin' more like a poem 'un a hay field. Some folks don't see nahthin' in it but th' heat an' th' sweat an' th' hard work. But look round here. There want never nahthin' purtier. There's th' sky up there like a million blue eyes run into one,

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an' th' sun blazin' down like a woman's smile, an' every thing catches up th' light an' sends it back. Th' wind blows kind o' soft like it 'uz makin' love t' th' fields an' they nod away jes' uz though they's sayin' yes."

Lilt stopped and sank lower into his luxurious couch. He stretched his legs wide apart then pulled them up and taking off his hat balanced it upon his knee.

"You must be in love, Lilt," Newton said, quizzically.

Lilt grinned sheepishly.

"Don't know uz that follows, though bein' in love haint such an awful fix." He pulled a blade of hay and began chewing it. "I'm 'fraid it's gettin' t' be an epidemic in th' family."

"How's that!" Newton inquired innocently.

"Um! Well answer yer own riddles. Ef we're goin' t' finish this field t'night we'd better stop lazyin'."

He sprang to his feet and catching up his fork bent to his work with a will that soon made up for lost time. A man bearing a spade

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over his shoulder stalked past the line fence. It was Hi Simms. Lilt shouted to him.

“Hello Hi!”

Simms grunted an answer.

“Have yeh met our new hand?” Lilt called.

Simms turned toward Newton and passed on with an oath.

“I’m ’fraid Simms haint of a fergivin’ nature,” Lilt said, grimly. Newton smiled rather seriously.

Another figure came down the road. It was a girl riding a plow horse bare back. Her sun bonnet had fallen back from her head displaying a round, good natured face that reflected the colours of perfect health. She sent a sturdy hail across the field.

“Hello, Lilt!”

Lilt turned quickly. A broad smile spread over his face.

“Hello Sue!” he called back. “Hold up a minnit.”

He dropped his fork where he stood and hastened up to the fence, close to which the girl

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had drawn her horse. Newton leaned on the handle of his fork and looked at them for a moment. He smiled to himself. Then he sighed heavily and turned away. An agonised cry was ringing in his ears again. Sibley's cry when he wanted to tell her that he loved her: "Don't." The cry had stunned him then, had half deadened his sensibilities, but ever since it had rung in his ears with a persistence that drowned out all other sounds, while there glimmered before his eyes the vision of Sibley's face, white, drawn, almost tortured, as she shrieked it. He had tried to keep the sound of that cry out of his mind but it beat constantly at the doors of his senses and forced itself in.

"Don't." It was a cry that drowned every half-formed hope. Its sound awoke him from a dream and robbed him of even the excuse for dreaming. It seemed to sound the death knell of his love, yet it rang on his heart strings with a pulsing harmony.

"Don't." What did it mean? Was it a

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command, or an appeal? Was it a frown, or a flood of tears? Was it a cry, or a wail? Was it a rebuke, or a petition?

It rang in his ears in a dozen different keys. Its note ranged from discord to harmony. It bade him forget, and it bade him hope. It stopped his voice and it urged him to speak. It told him he was not loved and it told him he was loved. At last its varying cadence rolled into one that bade him wait. "Wait and hope?" he asked himself. No, only wait.

He had forgotten Lilt and the girl at the fence. He had almost forgotten where he was. He roused himself. Lilt was at work again.

"Been t' sleep?" Lilt asked.

"No, only resting. Who was the young lady?"

"Sue Graham."

"A very pretty girl."

Lilt answered nonchalantly.

"Oh, I don't know. Some folks think so."

Newton shrugged his shoulders.

"You overdo your carelessness," he said.

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"Why don't you say that you think her the prettiest girl in the world and ease your conscience?"

"Mind yer own bizness. She hain't engaged to another feller anyway."

One of the tines of Newton's fork broke with a snap. Perhaps it was because he so savagely thrust it into the hay that it buried its point in the ground. Without a word he started toward the barn for another.

As he strode over the stubble his pursuing thoughts were upon him again. "Wait." Wait for what? Wait to see every vestige of hope pass from him? Wait for the darkness to settle all about him? Wait to see Sibley the wife of another? Wait for his love to die? Wait for these things, or wait for what?"

He came to the barn and entered it. He was just about to take down a fork from the wall when a sound startled him. He listened. The sounds came from the loft. They were sobs, the sobs of a man in awful agony. Newton would have turned away but something held

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him where he was. With the sobs there came a voice, choked, husky, tortured. The voice was Ridgeby's.

“Oh, my God,” it cried. “Are yeh ever goin’ t’ fergive me, an’ free me from th’ mem’ry of it. Oh Jim, our Jim, th’ boy yeh sent us an’ who I wouldn’t have an’ sent away. Oh God don’t torture me no more. It’s killin’ me, it’s killin’ me. Haint I suffered enough. Haint yeh taken every one fr’m us because I sent th’ one away. Haint yeh torn our hearts with bereavements. Haint yeh given us little ones’ t’ love an’ ’n taken ’em from us again. Oh God I can’t stand no more. Oh God in Heaven deliver me from my torture. Fergive me an’ let me know ’at I am fergiven. Don’t do with me, thy son, as I did with my son. Don’t refuse t’ fergive me as I refused t’ fergive him. Don’t turn yer face from me as I turned my face from him. I know how awfully I sinned. I fergive him as yeh commandest me seven times an’ seven times seven I bore with him, but I thought I could bear no more an’ sent him away. Oh,

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God, yeh must know how I've repented of it. Yeh must know how I've suffered fer it. Yeh must know of the sleepless nights an' th' tortured days. Yeh must know how I've tried to undo th' wrong but it's been in vain. I opened th' door an' told him t' go an' he went, an' we haint never seen him sence. Fer twenty-five years I've suffered. Oh take it from me now I can bear no more. I can bear no more. I can bear no more."

The words became choked with sobs. Newton stole quietly out.

Chapter VIII

AS a usual thing in the neighbourhood of Beverly Corners the semi-annual visit of the minister to his parishioners is an occasion of great moment. Even the less piously inclined take on for the time a sanctimonious air and arrayed in the starched discomfort of their Sunday clothes agree with all the articles of faith with devout reverence. They take upon themselves, as it were, the odour of sanctity along with that of tobacco and camphor balls. The season which the minister spends with a family is one of solemnity. The table creaks under its weight of viands, the worldly pleasure of whose consumption is tempered with doctrinal discussions of fore-ordination, predestination and election. The head of the family loses himself in the labyrinth of an argument and allows his spiritual shepherd to lead him out. His better half fidgets, makes excuses for the cooking which privately she exults over. The hired hands eat in stupid

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silence and hurry away as soon as possible. The children, banished to the uncertainties of a second table, hang about the doors and await their turn with ill-concealed impatience.

The old pastor always hailed with a sensation of relief the day appointed to spend with the Ridgeby household. There was an air of quiet holiness about the place that melted his austere piety into a more fervent passion. He there came upon a love of the Deity which displaced for a time his sermonized fear. He laid aside, while with them, his hard, uncompromising doctrines of belief and allowed himself to be swept into the arms of the one absorbing, comforting, healing promise of love. He ceased to think of himself as the appointed agent of the most High, the earthly warrior of Divinity, put here to battle against the forces of evil, and thought of himself only as the child of Love.

But that evening a pall hung about the Ridgeby tea-table. None of those about it could have explained its presence. If each had

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attempted it each would have given a different answer. Yet there it was and no one was free from its influence. Ridgeby's face was drawn and set and in its deepened lines gave token of the mental agony he had gone through out in the barn. There was a tremulousness about the corners of his mouth and a half sigh would break from him at times to be hidden by a cough. Now and then he would sweep his eyes over the five vacant chairs each of which his quickened memory peopled with a child. Oblivious to his duties as host he took no part in the conversation which his wife vainly tried to maintain. Even the old minister found his fount of garrulousness checked by an influence unknown to it before. The usual vapid current of his utterances became dried up and the influence about him took away from him even the desire to set it in motion again.

Abner Hawkins, coming over in the afternoon to borrow a hand rake, had been invited to stay to tea. He sat next to Newton whom he favoured at times with a frown. Newton tried

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to treat him with a degree of politeness, but failing in that had fallen back on the easier policy of ignoring him. Sibley sitting opposite now and then looked up at them. Perhaps she was comparing their faces. She appeared, however, quite unconcerned and she was the only one at the table who seemed entirely at ease. Lilt, overawed by the presence of the minister, had relapsed into a silence which he broke only with grunts. Even old Reuben's chattering tongue was less active than usual.

"I'll tell yeh what 'tis, Elder," he piped, after the silence had become to him unendurable, "Things er mighty dull round here now seems t' me, an' ef yeh'll take my *advice*, yeh'll wake 'em up a bit. What we need is a good ole-fashioned revival. None o' yer tame meetin' ev'ry other night affairs, but a reg'ler amen time with plenty o' glory mixed up in it. They need stirrin' up. That's what they need. Yeh'll give 'em a smell o' brimstone ef yeh'll take my *advice*."

The minister sighed.

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“A visitation of the spirit at the present time would be most cheering,” he answered. “I have been feeling myself that some special endeavours should be made. I am afraid that we have not been pressing the work in the vineyard as bravely as the Master would wish. I hope I am not failing in my duty.”

“Give ’em more fire, Elder, that’s my *advice*,” Reuben exclaimed, swinging his hand about his head to warn away a too familiar fly. “Give ’em more fire. That’s what they need. Let ’em smell th’ brimstone comin’ up through th’ floor. Yeh preachers er too easy on sinners now days seems t’ me. Yeh don’t show ’em what they’re comin’ t’. Yeh let ’em jog ’long th’ road t’ perdition altogether t’ easy, when what they need is proddin’. Give it t’ ’em, Elder, that’s my *advice*. Warm ’em up. Spare not th’ ungodly an’ temporise not with th’ wicked. Better take my *advice*, Elder, an’ heat ’em up a bit.”

“Reuben seems to want to drive people into Heaven with a prairie fire,” Newton said qui-

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etly. "How much will a man be worth in Heaven who has to be scared into going there?"

"Can't go back on scripture," Reuben piped decidedly. "An' ef yeh'll take my *advice* yeh won't try t'."

"Let the wicked flee from the wrath to come," the minister sighed.

"Come unto me all ye who are weary and heavy laden," Newton returned quietly.

"They that have done evil shall come into the resurrection of damnation."

"They who have done good into the resurrection of Life," Newton rejoined.

"Who-so-ever resisteth the power shall receive unto themselves damnation."

"Knock and it shall be opened unto you."

"He that believeth not shall be damned."

The old minister's face was taking on an expression more austere. His spare form became more erect. His dull eyes lighted. Their shaggy brows drew down closer over them. His voice took on a deeper and fuller intonation

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and as he poured out his anathemas with a growing animation he seemed to forget his surroundings and allowed his voice to grow stronger. His vehemence called Ridgeby out of his dreams. Reuben's face took on an expression of triumph. He chuckled to himself. The old minister ceased for a moment and turned his piercing eyes full on Newton.

"Young man," he thundered, "Have you the fear of God in your heart?"

"I hope not," Newton returned slowly.

"Prepare ye then for the fires of Hell."

"I hope that my heart contains something which my Creator will esteem more highly than fear."

The minister's face looked a question.

"Love."

Supper was finished. The entire family went out into the front yard beneath the walnut trees. Off toward the west the sun was flaming a golden farewell. A tree toad was singing somewhere. There was no wind and the trees were motionless. Ridgeby told of Mandy Spear's adventure with Miss Latey.

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“I am afraid that Sister Latey has very little of the Christian spirit in her soul,” the minister said solemnly, tipping back against the house and putting the tips of his fingers together.

“I b’lieve she’s possessed of th’ devil,” Mrs. Ridgeby broke in.

“I am verily afraid that you are right, as usual, Sister Ridgeby,” the minister assented, nodding his head.

“Now I believe Miss Latey’s got her good pints jes’ as well’s any body else, only we don’t happen t’ see ’em,” Ridgeby put in charitably.

“Pints, pints,” snapped his wife. “I shud think she did have pints, an’ she haint happy less she’s stickin’ somebody with’ em neither.”

“Now I tell yeh what ’tis, Elder,” Ridgeby said slowly. “It’s too bad ’bout Miss Latey. Why she an’ I ust t’ be young folks t’gether. Don’t seem like it could be th’ same girl.” He stopped a moment and looked up into the walnut trees. A rough tenderness came into his voice when he spoke again.

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“ Purty girl she ust t’ be in them days, gone on over fifty years now. She ’uz light complected an’ her skin ’uz smooth an’ white. Her cheeks ’uz as red as an early pippin. A robin’s chirp want no sweeter ’n her voice, and when she laughed she showed two rows o’ purty teeth ’at were as white’s fresh milk. A great big dimple ust t’ play hide an’ seek round her mouth. She had great, long brown hair ’at fell in a ripple way t’ her waist, an’ her great blue eyes were jes’ shinin’ with fun an’ mischief.” Ridgeby stopped and looked up into the walnut trees again.

“ She ’uz a little body, but as plump as a butter ball. Th’ boys ’uz all sweet on her, an’ I didn’t blame ’em a bit. Fact is I ust’ t’ spark ’er m’self a little ’fore I met Em’ly.” Ridgeby gazed quizzically at his spouse.

“ An’ I b’lieve yer sorry yeh didn’t marry her ’stead o’ me,” she answered with affected asperity.

“ Oh, Pshaw, now Em’ly, yeh know ’taint no sech thing. Don’t s’pose I’d a stood no show nohow. She ’uz allus givin’ me some sort of a

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dig, and La, how she does hate me now. We did ust t' go round a good deal t'gether. I remember onct when a feller come through here we went an' had our daggertypes taken. I shudn't be surprised ef hern 'uz kickin' round th' house yet sommers. I s'pose th' one I gin her went int' th' stove fifty years ago."

"I know her's did anyhow," laughed his wife.

"Folks said as how we must be engaged, but, La, there want nahthin' in it," Ridgeby went on after a minute. "Purty soon Em'ly's pa moved in on th' farm next t' mine an' I fell smack in love with her, an' Miss Latey went t' goin' with somebody else. Si Hawkins seems like. I never seen much of her after that. She didn't go out much enymore. Her pa's health want very good and I guess she stayed home with him."

Ridgeby's eyes had a vacant look in them and he seemed to be talking more to himself than to his auditors. He paid but little attention to them.

"It want long after me an' Em'ly uz mar-

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ried when Miss Latey's pa died, an' she took down sick right after it. I guess she over did takin' care o' th' ole man. She was low for quite a spell an' folks scarcely thought she'd come through it, but she did after a while. But her sickness left her changed a good deal. Her purty hair all come out an' it never come in heavy agen, an' her cheeks stayed pale an' sallow, an' th' mischief 'uz all gone out of 'er eyes. She never 'uz like she was before, an' when her good looks went her temper come in, an' what a change! Yeh'd never think it 'uz th' same girl. Some folks thought as how ther must a been a love scrape mixed up in it, but I didn't know nahthin 'bout it. Come t' think 'bout it Si Hawkins did light out 'bout that time and never come back no more. That may have had somepin t' do with it.

“Jess as soon as she got up she sold what little prop'ty th' ole man left an' went t' keepin' store. Th' fust thing we knew she 'uz jes' 'uz she is now, an ugly cross ole maid. I—I—can't help feelin' kinder sorry fer her.”

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Ridgeby brushed what might have been a tear out of his eyes and changed the subject.

Abner turned to Lilt.

"Goin' t' th' dance down t' Thompson's, Tuesday night, Lilt?"

"Guess I will. You an' Sibley goin'?"

"Course. Who yeh goin' to take?"

"Had guessed I'd take one o' th' Graham girls over, but changed m' mind. Newt an' I er goin' it alone. I want t' give him a knock down t' all th' folks, an' couldn't do much with a girl taggin'. Help me out, won't yeh? Newt don't know nobody an' I want t' get him in."

Abner scowled.

"Guess me an' Sib's got all we can tend t', ain't we Sib? Anyhow I'm kinder keerful who I give knockdowns t'. Yeh can't be too perticular yeh know."

Sibley looked quickly at Newton. He was gazing away toward the west and did not seem to have heard Abner's words. Lilt frowned and changed the subject.

"How's Simpkins makin' it, Ab?"

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"Ain't doin' much. Dad's got t' put 'im off next week. Kind o' tough."

Lilt's voice became full of a surprised disgust.

"Yeh don't mean t' say that th' ole man's goin' t' put 'im out jes' fore harvest?"

"Time's up. Dad foreclosed las' fall yeh know," Abner returned carelessly.

"Why, he cud pret' near raise th' mortgage ef yeh'd only wait till after harvest," Lilt exclaimed. "He an' his wife have worked like nailers, an' pret' near killed 'emselves. They've got a whoopin' big crop, too."

"Yes," said Abner, "I 'us lookin' it over las' night. Dad'll make a good thing out o' that crop. Wheat's headed out so heavy t' stalks bend almost down t' th' ground. Corn's doin' mighty well, too!"

"How's th' ole woman?" Lilt asked to cover up his rising anger.

"Pret' bad off I guess. Can't live more'n a month. Dad 'uz lucky in this deal. He's got a man t' go right in next week. Simpkins

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wanted him t' wait a little but Dad couldn't figure no way out."

"Where 're they goin'?" Lilt growled it.

"Dunno," Abner answered carelessly. "Dad's got a good man t' go in. He harvests th' crop fer a tenth. Dad's had his eyes on that north medder o' Thompson's fer some time. Guess he'll make 'nuff out o' this deal t' buy it. Thompson's holdin' it pret' stiff, but guess he'll come down."

"What does Simpkins get out o' th' crop?" Lilt asked. "Two thirds?"

"Two thirds?" exclaimed Abner. "Well, I guess Simpkins don't get no two thirds of our crop."

Newton turned away from the sunset.

"Do you mean to say," he asked slowly, "That you and your father are going to take a farm away from a man when with three weeks longer time he could redeem it; that you are going to steal a crop which a man has slaved months to bring forth, for which he has toiled and laboured and to which he has given his

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very life; that you are going to take the product of this man's sweat, for which you have not given a moment's thought or as much as raised a finger to produce, and give the producer nothing; that you are also going to turn a dying woman into the road that you may make a few dollars?"

"Law's law," Abner exclaimed doggedly. "We can't go behind that."

"If you are going to do these things," continued Newton, a little warmer, "You and your father are a set of the——"

He caught an expression on Sibley's face. It was an appeal.

"Of the——most punctilious business men I ever met."

He got up and walked toward the barn. Lilt followed him.

There was a sneer on Abner's face. On Sibley's a look such as a buried heart-ache gives.

Chapter IX

TUESDAY night came. There was to be a dance in Thompson's new barn. Lilt and Newton hurried through their chores. Just as they finished Abner drove up in his democrat wagon and took Sibley in. He could have taken Newton and Lilt on the rear seat but he did not suggest the idea. He was in his working clothes.

When the milking was finished Lilt and Newton started for Thompson's on horseback. They did not stop for saddles but rode the plow horses bareback.

A heavy rain had fallen during the day and the roads were heavy with mud. The night was pitchy dark. Black clouds, scurrying low, threatened to renew the downpour. The air was chilly and damp. A fog was settling down. Lilt carried a lantern. The dismal light it threw was all but lost in the heavy darkness. The horses followed the road mechanically. Neither Newton nor Lilt had much to

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say. There was something depressing in the atmosphere. A light twinkled at them down the road.

“That’s Simpkins’s place,” said Lilt, as they came nearer to it. “He must be in a pret’ bad way. Ain’t Hawkins a mean cuss t’ put ’im out? He worked like a nailer in hopes he cud save th’ farm an’ now he loses th’ farm an’ th’ crop, too. A feller might ’uz well die an’ be done with it when he gets into Old George Hawkins’s hands. I b’lieve he’d skin flints for a cent and try ’em out for th’ fat.”

“I don’t see how the fiend can sleep at night,” exclaimed Newton warmly.

“Don’t b’lieve he does,” Lilt returned. “He’s too mean t’ spend time, even sleepin’.”

“What’s Simpkins going to do?” Newton asked.

“Dunno. I saw him t’other day. He was lookin’ mighty glum, an’ didn’t have much t’ say.”

As they were passing Simpkins’s house they heard a feeble cry that sounded like that of a

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child. The cry came again a little louder. Newton thought it came from the side of the road and he checked his horse. Lilt stopped also and holding his lantern over his head peered into the darkness. Again the cry. With it came a woman's whispered "Sh!" Lilt uttered an exclamation and sprang to the ground. Newton followed him.

The pale light from the lantern fell upon a rude bed set up by the fence. It bore a woman with a child by her side. Sitting on the ground with his head buried in his hands was a man.

"Is that you, Simpkins?" Lilt cried.

There was no answer for a moment. Then the man's voice broke into the night. It was husky and hard, sullen and hopeless.

"Yes, it's me."

A stronger light from the lantern fell upon the bed. The woman turned feebly toward it, blinking her eyes. The child hushed its cry. The woman's face was yellow and sunken. The bones protruded as though the skin was stretched over a skull. The teeth looked

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ghastly. Her eyes were staring and had the lustre of fever in them. A claw-like hand rested on the baby's cheek. The woman coughed. It seemed that the effort would shake her in pieces. The man did not look up, but pulled his head deeper in his rounded shoulders.

"What's the matter?" Lilt asked after a moment.

Simpkins answered without moving.

"Put out."

"Damnation!" a second later. "What 're you goin' t' do?"

"Die."

The woman coughed again. The child wailed. Lilt drew himself up.

"Not jes' yet. Did Hawkins put yeh out here? Couldn't he even let yeh stay in the house?"

"We're here, hain't we?"

Again the woman coughed. She tried to draw the thin coverlid closer about her. The fog was sinking down denser and it began to drizzle.

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“Didn’t he give yeh no show ’tall?” Lilt asked.

“He said we cud go t’ th’ pore house. He ’uz payin’ taxes t’ s’port that, ’n ’at ’uz all he cud do fer paupers.”

“Why didn’t yeh come t’ somebody an’ tell ’em somepin?” Lilt asked a little sharply. “We haint all Hawkinses, by a long chalk.”

“What’s th’ use. Better die like we’re goin’ t’.”

“What d’ye want to die for?”

“What’d I want to live fer?”

“While there’s life there’s hope, yeh know.”

“Not fer me. There haint nahthin fer me, ’cept trouble. God knows there’s ’nuff o’ that.”

There came a sob in the man’s voice. He looked up. His black bearded face had a look of dogged hopelessness on it. His eyes were heavy and dull.

“What d’yeh talk hope t’ me fer?” he continued sullenly. “Have I got anything t’ hope fer? See how I’ve worked. There was th’ grasshoppers three years ago, then come th’

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dry spell, then las' year everything failed. 'Tween it all I cudn't meet th' mortgage. I felt pretty blue, but I didn't think it wuz s' bad. I thought ef I had a big crop this year I cud pay up an' save m'self. We worked like tigers, me an' th' woman. Lize killed herself workin' s' hard. It made me sick seein' her playin' out so, but she would stick to it, an' was countin' on how we cud both rest like next year. Jes' look at 'er now. She'll have a good rest. Our work counted though. Crop 'uz a comin' in good shape. I never see wheat n' corn grow so. We were feelin' mighty peart like an' had tuk up heart wonderfully, when here, jes' 'uz I begin cuttin', Hawkins gets th' farm in his own name, comes in, claims all th' crops, an' turns th' woman an' me out in th' road t' die, er go t' th' pore house. We won't go there, so we'll die. Th' Simpkinses allus wuz pore, but none of 'em 'uz ever paupers."

Newton had been a silent onlooker up to this time. Then he broke out. His voice was low and hard.

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"Why didn't you kill Hawkins?" he asked slowly.

"What's th' use?"

Simpkins was too far sunk in hopelessness even to be vindictive.

"Who's in th' house?" Lilt asked suddenly.

"Hi Simms."

"Hawkins an' him makes a good team. Won't he let yeh stay there 'til mornin'?"

"We ain't askin' no favours."

"Stay here, Newt," said Lilt, "While I go up t' th' house an' see Simms. Guess he'll be willin' t' take 'em in over night, enyhow."

Simpkins put his head down into his hands again.

"Yeh needn't do it," he said. "None of us 'll ever set foot on th' place agen. We're beat out an' gin out."

"Somepin's got t' be done," Lilt exclaimed.

"Yeh can't do nahthin'. Yeh'd better drive on, Goin' t' th' dance down t' Thompson's?"

"Yes."

"Ab Hawkins 'll prob'ly be down there

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shakin' his laigs jes' 'z though he hadn't turned nobody out here t' die."

"Was it Abner who turned you out?" Newton asked.

"He an' th' ole man come t'gether."

"I was going to give him a thrashing the other day," Newton exclaimed hotly. "I wish now I had done it."

Simpkins did not reply. The woman coughed again and turned wearily towards them.

"Yeh might 'uz well drive on," she said feebly. "'Tain't no use worryin' none 'bout us. I'll be gone I guess 'fore mornin'. Th' baby an' I can't las' long in this fowg. Seems like I cud feel it way int' my bones. We're much obleeged t' yeh but yeh can't help us none."

"What had we best do, Newt?" Lilt asked.

"Take them back to Ridgeby's, of course," Newton answered briskly. "I don't intend to leave this woman here to die, which she will do very shortly if she is not taken care of at

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once. Ridgeby and his wife will be glad to take them in."

"That's right," Lilt returned heartily. "Aunt Em'ly 'd have a fit ef she knowed they 'uz out here. She allus did like Mis' Simpkins, an' I've hearn her say th' baby 'uz th' prettiest young 'un in th' county. What say, Simpkins?"

"We won't go."

"Won't go? Why not?" Lilt exclaimed.

"Hain't Ridgeby's girl goin' t' marry Ab Hawkins? I don't want nahthin' t' do with th' hull tribe."

"Look here," said Newton firmly. "We are not going to let your wife and baby stay out here to die just because Sibley Ridgeby wants to make a fool of herself. There will be a hearty welcome for you up there and you must go."

"We hain't askin' no favours."

"It's no favour. It is only humanity. I am going to carry your wife and Lilt will take the child. You may lead the horses. Now, come on."

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Newton leaned over the bed. The child wailed again. The woman waved a feeble dissent. Newton was gathering the bedclothes around her preparatory to lifting her into his arms when Simpkins got up. He pushed Newton roughly to one side.

"Guess she'd ruther ha' me kerry her, wouldn't yeh, Lize?"

"Yes, Joel."

Newton fell back. Simpkins lifted the frail form of his wife, bedclothes and all.

"Are yeh easy, Lize?"

"Yes, Joel."

She stifled a cough.

"Oop's a daisy!" cried Lilt, tossing the child on his shoulder. He turned into the road and led the way with the lantern.

"You had better mount one of the horses and carry your wife that way," Newton said to Simpkins.

"She's easier this way." His voice was just as sullen and hopeless as before.

"Possibly," Newton returned. "But it will be harder on you."

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“Never min' me.”

Simpkins struck full into the middle of the road. The black mud clung to his boots and weighted him down. He bent his head and plodded stolidly forward. Newton brought up the rear with the horses.

It was fully a mile back to Ridgeby's up hill and down dale. In places the mud was over their ankles. No one spoke. If Simpkins's arms ached he did not let even a sigh betray it. He even stifled his pantings. Now and then the woman coughed. Only once was there a word.

“Ain't I heavy, Joel?” the woman asked, sighing.

“No, Lize.”

By the time they reached the house Simpkins was staggering beneath his load. Newton shouted to Ridgeby. The old man came to the door.

“What's th' matter?” he asked.

The situation was explained to him. His wife came and peered over his shoulder.

“Waal! Waal! Come right in,” Ridgeby

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exclaimed, heartily. "Don't stay out there in th' fowg. Can't offer yeh much, Simpkins, but yer mighty welcome t' what little we've got. Consarn Hawkins for th' meanes' man I ever hearn of. Take yer wife right into th' front room there. Better heat up a little water, Em'ly, Mis' Simpkins might want somepin' hot."

"Please don't let us make no trouble, Mis' Ridgeby," wheezed the sick woman.

"No trouble 'tall," bustled Mrs. Ridgeby. "Reuben go fetch a bucket o' water. Better bring in a armful o' wood while yer at it, too. I'm 'fraid it's a little chilly for th' baby. Aint she a purty little thing?"

Simpkins sat down in a chair and looked stolidly at the floor. He was holding his hands in a helpless fashion.

Lilt changed his boots.

"Well, Newt," he said, giving his boots a stomp to settle them, "Guess you 'n me c'n go an' have our dance now can't we?"

"I don't believe I feel much like dancing," Newton returned.

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“Guess we'd better go. I promised one o' th' Graham girls I'd be there sure pop, an' I know you've got three dances promised from Sibley.”

“Well, come on.”

The eyes of the woman followed them gratefully. Simpkins continued gazing at the floor.

Chapter X

THEY could hear the fiddles screeching out on the muggy air long before they reached Thompson's.

"Tee-dee-dle, tee-dee-dle, tee-dee-dle-dee-dee," sang Lilt, humming the rhythm of the air. "Money Musk, by Jiminy! Gee up, Dan! Come on Newt, th' twitches's a gettin' int' my laigs already. Tee-dee-dle, tee-dee-dle, tee-dee-dle-dee-dee! Gee up."

He pushed his horse into a clumsy trot. Newton caught something of his spirit and urged his own beast into a faster pace.

As they drew nearer other sounds became mixed with the music. Loud laughter in shrill treble and heavy bass, calls, shrieks, the pounding of many feet on the floor. Then they could hear, echoing above the tangled din, the hoarse voice of the caller. They came to Thompson's gate. A group of men was standing before it.

"What's up, Lilt?" cried some one. "Somepin's wrong when you're late t' a dance."

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"Where's Sue Graham?" bawled Charley Burrit.

"She went back on Lilt long ago," laughed Hugh Jenkins. "Haint had nahthin' t' do with him sence he got his hair cut."

They all laughed loudly. Lilt joined in with them.

"Don't you fellers bother none 'bout me. Yeh've got all yeh c'n do lookin' after yer own beaus," he returned good-naturedly. "Ef yeh think I'm foot loose I may be lookin' crost eyed at some of 'em."

They dismounted and hitched their horses with a long line of others.

"Better come cross th' road an' have some-pin'," Jake Anson invited. "Yeh want t' liven up a little."

Lilt declined with the excuse that he was not drinking that week.

A travelling vender of beer in original packages had set up a stand on the farther side of the road. A continual string of men filed out of the barn and crossed to the improvised

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bar. Newton saw Abner Hawkins with the crowd.

Lilt and Newton made their way into the barn. It was lighted by a multitude of lanterns. The place was filled with merry makers. The greater part of the men were in their working clothes, just as they had left the fields, with overalls tucked in boots, and supported by straps and strings. Here and there stood a more pretentious beau, resplendent and uncomfortable in a suit of "boughten clothes" and a turn down collar. Many of the girls wore calico dresses. All of them were simply clad, with perhaps a gay ribbon for decoration. But strong, supple forms, rosy cheeks and the bloom of perfect health decked them to a surfeit. In one corner was a group that held itself aloof from the rest. They looked on at the merriment but seemed to think themselves above mixing with it. They were better clad than the great crowd, but they did not look so natural. They were specimens of the pretending aristocracy.

A platform had been fitted up at the far end

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of the barn by putting planks across empty pork barrels. Upon this the orchestra was stationed. It consisted of two fiddles and a flute. The leading fiddle was played or rather worked by a stoop-shouldered, scraggy-haired old man, who bobbed his head backward and forward as he thrummed the strings. His son, a gosling of twenty, played the other. The flute was at the mercy of a great broad-shouldered Swede who played neither by note, nor by ear, but by main strength. The music they discoursed was not classical. It may at times have been discordant. But there was a hearty dash to it, a swinging rhythm, that set every foot into unconscious motion. As Lilt said, "It put the twitches into his laigs."

Lilt and Newton were at once surrounded by a jostling crowd. Lilt proved to be a general favourite, especially with the girls. He did have rather a gallant way about him. His rough clothes sat upon him with a natural grace. His eyes lighted up. His face was aglow.

Newton was introduced to everyone within

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hearing. Lilt raised his voice until it echoed all over the barn.

“ This is Newt Mills, th’ bes’ wras’ler I ever run against. Shake hands with him.”

Everyone came forward, the girls rather timidly, the men with a question as to his wrestling abilities. Inside of five minutes Newton had engaged to wrestle half of the men in the crowd at his earliest convenience. The fiddles set up a warning cry. The hoarse voice of the caller croaked above the din.

“ All set fer a quadrille.”

There was a general scramble for partners. Lilt caught Sue Graham around the waist and bore her off amid a shout to the centre of the barn. Newton looked around for Sibley. He caught sight of her at last at the far end of the barn. She was looking toward him and smiled when their eyes met. Then he saw Abner Hawkins coming through the door and starting toward her. Newton darted through the crowd and gained her side a few paces in front of Abner.

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“May I have this dance, Miss Sibley?” he asked.

He scarcely waited for an answer, but taking her arm led her out on the floor. Abner stopped and glared after them. A scowl came over his face. He started to jump forward but checked himself and retreated to the wall where he stood glowering at the dancers.

The sets were soon formed.

“Two more couple. Two more couple,” shouted the caller. “Two more couple. One more couple. All set.”

The fiddles gave a preliminary flourish, the flute uttered a shrill shriek and the dance began. Newton caught Sibley's hand and held it. A thrill ran over him as he did so. He pressed the hand tightly. He did not dare look toward her. If he had done so he would have seen a faint blush creeping up her throat and slowly suffusing her face.

“Tee-dee-dle, Tee-dee-dle, tee-dee-dle-dee-dee,” sang the fiddles. “First four forward and back. Tee-dee-dle, tee-dee-dle, tee-dee-dle-dee-

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dee." Forward again. Ladies change. Tee-dee-dle, tee-dee-dle, tee-dee-dle-dee-dee. Swing yer pardners. Lively now boys. Tee-dee-dle, tee-dee-dle, tee-dee-dle-dee-dee. Tee-dee-dle, tee-dee-dle, tee-dee-dle, tee-dee-dle-dee-dee. Grand right an' left. Hurry 'long there now, floor's strong. Let out yer laigs. Tee-dee-dle, tee-dee-dle——"

The dance romped on. Everyone put as much motion into the steps as possible. Newton and Sibley danced more quietly than the others but they enjoyed it fully as much. The rude music carried Newton out of himself. He forgot that Sibley was to marry Abner Hawkins. Sibley did think of it, but she tried to forget it.

Anson Thompson saw Abner leaning against the wall scowling darkly. He shouted with a laugh.

"Hullo Ab! What's matter? Mad 'cause 'nother feller's got yer girl?"

There came a general shout,

"Yeh want t' look out er that new hand o' Ridgeby's 'll cut yeh out."

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The men roared. The girls giggled. There came a pause in the dance. The fiddles were still for a moment.

"Yeh don't want t' let Sib get 'way fr'm yeh that easy," bawled Luke Smith. Sibley heard it. Her face turned scarlet.

"I wouldn't let a feller cut me out that way," jeered Amy Thompson.

Abner turned sullenly away and disappeared out the door. He was followed by a general roar. He turned around with a scowl.

The dance started again. Newton stole a look at Sibley. There was a pucker of irritation in her forehead, and a slight flush on her cheeks. He pressed her hand again. She covered her confusion by dancing harder than before. The dance came to an end. The fiddles died in a screech. There was quiet for a second, and the champing of the horses in the stables could be heard. Then the general buzz arose again.

"Shan't we go outside for a moment?" Newton asked as he led Sibley toward the door.

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"Don't you want to get away from this noise?"

"I don't dare to," she whispered back. "You had better leave me."

Her voice was strained. Just then Abner entered the door and started toward them. His face was flushed.

"I'll take Sib. Go mind yer own business," he growled, as he came up. He pulled Sibley rudely by the arm.

Newton was about to protest when Sibley turned away from him.

"Come on Abner," she said quietly.

Newton looked after her, but she did not turn back.

"Ab didn't get left that time," Jake Anson shouted.

"Sib's too sweet t' lose," laughed Tod Blake.

"Ab's apt t' get what he goes after," grinned Jim Simpson, the wit. There was a general groan.

Newton wondered how Sibley bore the rude chaff so quietly. Another dance was called.

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Newton had Amy Thompson for a partner. She accepted his arm with a simper. He went through the dance mechanically. The girl was very disappointed in him and thought him a very dull partner. He let the next dance go by and from a corner watched Sibley and Abner. Once she caught him looking at her. She dropped her eyes at once and looked away. At the end of the dance Abner left Sibley to visit the bar again. Newton hastened to her side.

“You promised me three dances, Miss Sibley. The next is a waltz. May I have it?”

“I am afraid to dance with you again,” she said, looking toward the floor. “I am afraid that Abner will make trouble if I do. You can see how he has been drinking. He was furious because I danced with you before.”

“He can make all the trouble with me that he wants to,” Newton exclaimed warmly.

“But please consider my position,” she pleaded.

“Don't you want to dance with me?” he asked earnestly, sinking his voice.

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"Y-Yes."

"Come on, then."

The music started. Before Sibley scarcely knew what she was doing she was whirled away. Newton forgot the awkward crowd swaying around him, forgot the rude scraping of the fiddles. He only remembered that he was holding Sibley's hand, that his arm was about Sibley's waist that his breath was mingling with hers. But he came to himself in a moment. There came a choking sensation in his throat. Sibley was to marry Abner Hawkins.

He looked about him. The fiddles were scraping harder than ever, but Sibley and he were alone on the floor. One by one the dancers had stopped to watch them. A rude voice broke out.

"Where's Ab Hawkins now?"

Sibley gave a start and looked around quickly.

"Why, we are the only ones dancing," she exclaimed quickly.

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Newton led her to a seat on the improvised benches and the dancing became general again. Abner came pushing his way roughly through the crowd. His eyes were watery and blood-shot. Newton caught a look from Sibley.

“Will you kindly take care of Miss Ridgeby,” he asked quietly of Abner as he came up. “I think I have robbed you of part of a dance.” Abner glared after him as he turned away.

Newton did not go near Sibley again during the evening. Now and then he would catch her eyes but she would always look away as though she did not see him. He pushed himself into the midst of the frolic. He danced with Amy Thompson again. She changed her mind about his being a dull partner. Later in the evening Lilt came up to him and drew him aside mysteriously.

“Say Newt,” he whispered, “Th’ folkes ’er dead set on seein’ yeh wras’le with Ab Hawkins. In this section people ’ud ruther see a wras’ling match thun dance eny night. They’ve

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hearn o' yer scrape with Hi Simms an' I haint been 'shamed t' tell em 'bout how yeh throwed me, an' they want t' see it. Ab's been doin' a heap o' talkin' round 'bout how he knows he cud throw yeh with one han', an' I want yeh t' take 'im down."

"If it will contribute to the amusement of the crowd to see me wrestle I have no particular objections to doing it," Newton replied. "I would rather have it with any one than Abner Hawkins, however."

"Don't think you will have eny trouble throwin' him. I c'n do it easy 'nuff m'self."

"It isn't that," Newton returned. "But I am afraid that trouble of some kind may grow out of it."

"I shuldn't be s'prised m'self ef there 'uz somepin of a rumpus," Lilt replied with a grin. "But I didn't think 'at yeh'd mind that much. Ab's been drinkin', pret' hard, an' so 've some of his cronies. Ef they see 'im getting th' worst of it they may pitch in. I'll stan' behind yeh an' see fair play. I guess we c'n hold our own."

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He sank his voice to an eager whisper.

“Th’ fact is, Newt, I’m jes’ akin’ fer a tussle o’ some kin’. Ef I don’t have a chance t’ blow off onct in ’bout so often I’d bust, an’ I’m jes’ ’bout bustin’ right now.”

Newton looked serious.

“I don’t want to get into a rough and tumble fight here,” he said. Then he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I do owe Abner Hawkins a thrashing though. Make any arrangements you want to.”

Lilt turned away. A moment later the caller announced that the next dance would be omitted and that Newton Mills, Hiram Ridgeby’s new hand, would “wras’le” three throws with Abner Hawkins, “nex’ t’ Lilt Murdock th’ bes’ wras’ler in Hawkins county.”

A loud clapping of hands followed the announcement and there was a general move to get away from the centre of the floor. Newton was looking toward Sibley. He saw a shiver run over her and an expression of pain sweep over her face. He was sorry then that he had promised to wrestle with Abner.

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The crowd parted in front of him. He advanced to the centre of the barn. Abner came up with a swagger. A circle was quickly formed around them. Both threw off their coats and made ready for the struggle. They stood facing each other. Abner's face was sullen and darkened with a frown. Newton was smiling, but it was a hard smile. The sympathy of the men seemed to be with Abner, that of the girls was inclined toward Newton.

"All's fair," exclaimed Abner with a scowl.

"All's fair," assented Newton quietly.

"Get after him Ab," shouted Jake Anson.

"Get after him," repeated the men.

Abner made a sudden dive for Newton's feet, expecting to catch him around the ankles. He found himself lying flat on his face with no opponent before him. As he plunged down Newton had lightly leaped completely over him. He stood smiling quietly while Abner got up.

"Got left that time, didn't yeh Ab," laughed Lilt. "Try it agen."

Abner did try it again. After circling cau-

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tiously about his opponent for a moment and making several feints he suddenly shot down towards his feet again. That time he caught them. He gave them a pull. Newton was falling. The men cheered; a startled cry of disappointment came from the girls. But Newton did not fall. He alighted on his hands. He seemed able to handle himself as well upon them as upon his feet. Abner tried to twist him around, tried to throw him over. He strained and tugged and panted. The drop of a pin could have been heard. Abner summoned up his strength for a grand effort. Then somehow he lost his balance and fell to the floor full on his back. Newton had suddenly supported himself on his head and catching Abner by the knees had given him a twist that sent him down. It was done so neatly that there was a general cheer.

Abner sprang to his feet and made a furious dash forward. Newton was not so easy with him that time. A sudden fury entered his heart. He caught Abner round the waist and raised him above his head, thought an instant

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of that woman he had found dying in a fence corner, and hurled him with all his might to the floor. The barn shook. The girls gave vent to a startled "Oh."

Abner got up slowly. He was dazed. He recovered himself in a moment. Blood began to flow from his nose. A look of hate came over his face. He gave a snarl.

"Come on, fellows!" he shouted.

Several roughs started out from the crowd. Newton braced himself. A feeling of infinite strength came over him, coupled with a desire to vent it. There was a general scramble on the part of the crowd to get away. Abner with an oath sprang toward Newton. Mills gathered himself together to receive him, when a face, scared and white came before him. It was Sibley's.

"Run!" she cried. The tone was one of agonised entreaty.

Abner caught her rudely by the arm and pulled her to one side. Newton was on him like a cat. Two blows sent Abner reeling to

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the floor, stunned, unable to rise. Lilt sprang forward and seizing Sibley around the waist bore her out of danger.

Those coming to Abner's assistance halted when they saw the fate of their leader. Newton did not wait, but sprang at them before they recovered themselves. One found company with Abner on the floor, another fell back dazed by a blow in the neck. Then the five remaining closed on Newton. He struck out wildly. Lilt leaped forward, caught a man with each brawny hand and knocked their heads together. Then he caught another. Newton had just knocked the last of his assailants down when there was a general interference. Then he sank to the floor. A great red blotch stained his shirt. An open pocket knife with blood on the blade was lying by his side.

Sibley caught her breath. She almost cried aloud. She started to push her way toward him when she checked herself and turned her white face toward the door. She did not look back until she was outside it.

Chapter XI

IT was the general opinion among the neighbours that Hi Simms thought more of the number of his cattle and his spreading acres than he did of his wife and children. Not that anyone ever ventured the opinion where it was likely to reach the ears of Hi Simms himself, for there was something about his character to inspire a respect which was nearer akin to fear. His years of struggle with the obstinate soil had not only given his physical frame a hardness as of iron, they had also given his heart something of the temper of steel. His form was gnarled and twisted and his face was bronzed by the hot Iowa suns. His deep-set eyes shaded by shaggy overhanging eyebrows glittered cold as ice. His hard, square jaw added to the harshness of his features.

Hi Simms was the embodiment of toil; of treadmill toil that knows not the meaning of

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rest; of toil that puts pleasures among the unknown; of toil that murders love. He was born in toil, bred in toil and toil was all he knew. He spared not himself. He spared no one around him.

Hi Simms had a wife. It might be thought from this that the light of romance had once entered his life but to Hi Simms marriage was simply an economical arrangement. When by unceasing industry he had attained a farm and a mortgage he found a housekeeper a necessity. A servant would demand wages. A wife would be cheaper. So he married Jane Smalley. Jane married Hi because she was the eldest of the children and it was time that she had a house of her own. Hi Simms was looked upon as a man with prospects who could take care of a woman, so Jane's parents favoured the match. Jane had always been taught to do as she was told. So she became Hi Simms's wife.

Hi Simms's wife was at the pump wiping the pails preparatory to milking. A little tow-headed youngster was hanging to her skirts.

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He was crying. Two more were quarrelling in the chip pile, and still another—a thin, scrawny, mite of a girl,—could be seen through the open doorway with a babe in her arms. The mother seemed oblivious to the turmoil about her and was keeping her eyes bent steadily upon the milk pails.

She was a small woman and stoop shouldered. Her thin, bony hands were red and misshapen. Her bent body was clad in a faded calico gown. It had one redeeming feature. It was clean. Her thin, iron-gray hair was twisted into a little hard ball on the back of her head. Her face was the face of hopelessness. The features were plain. A smile might have lightened them perhaps, but it was years since she had smiled. Her feet were bare.

Any one who knew Jane Simms would have seen at once that she was in an unusual mood. Ordinarily she would have worked more rapidly and would have scolded the children. She would also have been talking to herself. It had been so long since she had much of anyone

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to talk to that she had fallen into this habit. But this evening she was neither talking to herself, nor was she scolding the children, nor was she working with her usual hopeless energy.

Suddenly the childish turmoil ceased. The tow-headed youngster buried himself deeper into his mother's skirts. The quarrelling children stopped their wrangle and sat still among the chips. The girl in the kitchen strove to quiet the babe she was carrying and partially succeeded. The master of the place was coming out from the barn. Jane Simms was just scouring the bottom of the last pail as he came up. He was going right on to the water barrel by the corner of the house without a word as he had done a thousand times before. There was a revolution between him and that barrel. Jane Simms set the pail she was wiping by the side of the pump.

“Hi Simms!” she called.

The tone must have startled him, but he kept right on toward the water barrel.

“Hi Simms!”

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There was an emphasis in the tone that boded trouble, but he did not look back. He rolled his sleeves high up and was just about to plunge his arms deep down into the water when he was arrested by a voice so commanding, so shrill with pent up anger bursting into sound, that involuntarily he obeyed it.

“ Hi Simms! Stop!!! ”

He turned his head around. His wife was standing on the small wooden platform surrounding the pump with her hands resting on her hips.

“ Hi Simms, I’m agoin’ t’ Sister Marcey’s in Illinois.”

“ Oh, yeh be, be yeh? ”

“ Yes I be.”

“ What fer? ”

“ I’ve staid an’ slaved on this farm till I’m beat out an’ I be’nt agoin’ t’ do it no longer. I’ve cooked for all yer men folks an’ never said nahthin’. I’ve milked all these cows an’ churned th’ butter ’at you sold. I’ve worn clothes a nigger wouldn’t wear, an’ lived in

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this shanty that haint fitten fer a beast t' live in, an' what's worse 'n th' barns yer cattle's got. I haint been 'way fr'm th' place but onct an' 'at 'uz when ma' died an' yeh grumbled a hull lot 'bout it then. I'm sick an' tired o' th' hull thing. I'm goin' away and yeh can't stop me."

Simms turned squarely around and leaned against the barrel. His face darkened into a frown.

"Goin' be yeh. Well go. There haint nahthin' hindren."

"Yes, Hi Simms I'm agoin'. My min's made up. Yeh ken get 'long th' bes' way yeh can till yeh get ready t' hire a nigger."

"How 'bout th' brats?"

"Leave 'em; they're yourn."

The tow-headed youngster started to whimper.

"Shet up!" snarled Simms.

The mother said nothing.

"How'er yeh goin'," he asked after a pause.

"Walk, ef there haint no other way."

"Huh! Better run, yeh'll get there quicker."

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“ Yes, Hi Simms, I'll walk an' run too, an' I'll stop t' every house 'tween here an' Marcey's an' tell 'em I'm Hi Simms's wife an' a beggar.”

“ Tell 'em too, yeh run 'way fr'm yer brats.”

“ Yes, I'll tell 'em I run 'way fr'm th' brats, 'cause their father 'uz such a hog they want nahthin' but pigs an' I'd got tired livin' in th' pen.”

Simms was dumbfounded. He had come to look upon his wife as a machine. A thing to wash and cook and milk; an automaton wound up and warranted to run for life. He did not know how to take this sudden vagary. It filled him with the same harshness the stubbornness of one of his oxen would have done, except that he would have beaten his ox. He was a little more humane towards his wife. He looked at her for a moment. Then he asked:

“ When 'er yeh goin' ? ”

“ T'morrer.”

“ All right. I'm sat'sfied.”

Simms turned back to the water barrel as though he considered the question settled. His

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wife looked at him for a moment as though watching for some signs of softening. She saw none. Indeed she did not expect any. She gritted her teeth, then walked slowly towards the house, leaving the shining pails resting by the side of the pump. She did not enter the door but continued out past the rickety gate and seated herself by the side of the road.

After Simms had wiped his face and arms on the harsh towel that hung on a nail by the kitchen door he entered the house. The stove was cold. There were no preparations being made for supper. The scrawny girl was still walking up and down the room with the babe in her arms. The other children were huddled around the door. There was a scared expression on their faces.

Simms took off his plow boots, heavy with the mud that still clung to them, and stood them behind the stove. He put his bare feet upon a chair and lighting his pipe looked out the window to where his wife was sitting by the side of the road. Her perverseness angered him.

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"What's got int' yer ma?" he asked of the girl.

"Dunno," she answered, in a frightened voice.

"Go an' tell her I want my supper, an' I want it durned quick."

The girl walked sullenly out the door and going carefully down the rough path that the sleeping babe might not be wakened she delivered the message in all its coarse harshness to her mother.

Jane Simms did not turn towards her, but bent her eyes away to the west where the setting sun was lighting up a low hanging bank of clouds to a deep crimson.

"Yeh tell Hi Simms 'at what he gets t' eat in that house he cooks hisself," she answered after a moment. "I haint his nigger no longer."

The girl stared at her and carried the message to her father.

His face darkened deeper when he heard it.

"Go back an' tell her I don't want her clutterin' up th' front yard an' th' quicker she gets out o' sight th' better. An' tell her too there

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haint no need o' her comin' whimperin' round, nuther. She's made her bed an' she c'n lay in it."

His voice was dry and hard. Every word seemed an oath.

Again the girl made her way back to her mother and delivered the message nearly word for word.

Silently Jane Simms arose and crossing the road sat down on the other side.

"Give me th' brat," she said holding out her arms. "The' rest o' yeh'll have t' get long th' best yeh ken. I haint yer ma no longer."

The girl handed the babe to her mother. It was asleep and the woman laid it on the ground beside her.

"What's th' matter, maw?" the girl asked. "What's got int' yeh an' paw? Haint yeh goin' t' live t' our house no more?"

Jane Simms shook her head.

"Go back to yeh pa. I'm goin' away."

The girl turned and had crossed the road again when her mother called her back.

"I want t' kiss yeh, Viry," she said, and

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she pulled the girl down and kissed the pinched cheeks. It was almost the first time she had kissed her since she was a baby.

"I haint been a very good ma t' yeh, Viry," she said. There was a quaver in her voice. She held the thin hand of the girl in her own.

"I haint been a very good ma t' yeh, Viry, but I done th' best I could. I'd a liked t' sent yeh to school like other young'uns, but yer pa wouldn't give me no money t' buy yeh clothes an' yeh couldn't go th' way yeh was. I—I dunno what'll become o' yeh, Viry, an' th' rest o' th' young'uns, but I can't stand it no longer, an' I'm goin' away. Yeh won't see me no more.

"Lemme kiss yeh agin, Viry. There. An' onct fer th' twins, an' onct fer Tommy. Now go back t' yer pa, an be,—be a good girl Viry."

She turned quickly and busied herself with the babe which had begun to stir restlessly. She was winking her eyes as though there were tears in them.

The girl went back to her father. Her mother's display of affection was something

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new to her. She could not remember of having ever been kissed before. She would have liked to stay with her mother but she did not dare.

“Oh, paw,” said the girl as she reëntered the house, “What’s th’ matter with maw, she kissed me?”

“Kissed yeh, did she. Huh! Where’s the brat?”

“Maw tuk it.”

“Huh!”

For awhile Simms smoked in silence, then he arose and knocking the ashes out of his pipe went into the kitchen. He found the shelves empty. After awhile he found some beef in brine in the cellar and building a fire in the stove he cooked some of it. It was salt and burned and he could not eat it. Then the children came in. They were hungry and wanted their supper. When they found none they began to cry. Simms pointed to the skillet of beef and told them to eat that or go hungry. Then remembering that the cows had not been milked he put on his boots and taking the pails from

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the side of the pump went into the barnyard. It was hard work milking after his long hours of toil in the fields and he was a long time at it.

The house was dark when he went back to it. It seemed strange not to see a light in the kitchen window. He set the pails down by the side of the door and went in. He lighted a lamp and looked about him. The children had cried themselves to sleep. The little tow-headed youngster had curled himself up in a chair. His mouth was smeared round with grease and his dirty face was stained with tears. The twins had forgotten their quarrels and were asleep on the floor in each other's arms. He had nearly stumbled over them as he came in. The older girl was not to be seen. She was old enough to go to bed by herself.

Simms sat down in a chair and began to smoke. The room seemed very dreary. He turned the lamp up a little higher, but it smoked and he had to turn it down again. His pipe would not draw well. The cat behind the stove looked discontented. He pulled harder at his

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pipe and puffed it up to a glow. He glanced at the twins. They looked very dirty. He noticed for the first time that their clothes were made from flour sacks. He wondered why his wife had not gotten them better clothes. He was hungry, then he remembered that the children were probably hungry, too. He was a little bit sorry for them and cursed his wife's stubbornness.

He took up his weekly paper and tried to read, but the letters looked all upside down. The room seemed lonely. Something was missing from it. The little hard bottomed rocker looked strange. It was there that his wife always sat. He almost wondered if it seemed lonely in the room because she was not there. He never talked to her but she was always with him during the short evenings. He could look at her if he wanted to.

"What makes th' woman s' stubborn," he mused.

The children slept on. He thought they might be cold and getting a shawl he spread it

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over them. He took off his coat and threw it over the child in the chair. He had never thought of the children before. He wondered what he was going to do with them now that she was gone. He would have to hire a woman to come in and take care of them and do the cooking. He tried to think how it would seem to have some one else besides his wife sitting in the little rocker.

His pipe went out. As he got up to fill it he glanced out the window where by the dim moonlight he could see his wife sitting by the side of the road. The sight angered him.

“Damn the woman,” he muttered.

When he had lighted his pipe again he sat down and putting his feet upon a chair went on smoking.

The clock struck ten. Its solemn voice echoed in the room. It seemed to be calling someone. The tow-headed youngster stirred in his sleep but was still again in a moment.

Simms smoked more and more slowly. He found his thoughts going back to his wedding

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day. He had never thought of it since. He had never felt the sweet pangs of love but he knew that he had liked Jane Smalley better than any of the other girls of the neighbourhood. There was no nonsense about her. He had felt a little bit proud of her on their wedding day. She had looked almost pretty in her simple cambric gown. She was much different now. He wondered what made her so thin and bent.

He was getting a bit restless so he arose and began walking up and down the room. He walked past the window two or three times and then involuntarily he stopped and looked out. He was impatient with himself for doing so but somehow he could not help it. The moon had risen higher and it was quite light outside. He could see his wife very plainly. She was holding the babe in her arms and rocking monotonously to and fro. He wondered if it was not cold out there. He opened the door a very little. A damp chilling draft blew in. He wondered why she stayed out there. He decided that if she came in he would forgive her. He stood

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some little time waiting for her to come but she still sat there rocking to and fro. He even knocked lightly on the pane, but she did not hear. He wished she would come back.

The wish grew as he looked out at her thin worn form. It seemed a part of him. He could almost feel the cold and dampness himself. He wondered if she would come back if he asked her to, but he could not do that. It was not his fault that she was so foolish. But he decided that he would go out and speak to her anyway, perhaps he had been a little harsh.

He opened the door and went out. He forgot his boots and his hat. She did not seem to see him as he came up.

“Jane, yeh’re a fool.”

The woman said nothing, but continued rocking the babe in her arms. Simms’s voice was as harsh as ever.

“Jane yeh’re a fool, an’—durn it all, I’m a fool too. Ef yeh’re s’ set on goin’ t’ yer sister Marcey’s I don’t see uz ther’s nahthin’ hindrin’. Th’ farm ’s half yourn.”

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She looked up at him. It may be that the strange thing glittering on her cheeks was a tear.

“An’ say,” he went on hastily, “th’ corn’s done uncommon well an’ ef yeh’ll wait till after plowin’ p’raps I’ll go with yeh. An’—well, durn it all, we’ll take th’ brats too ef yeh want t’.”

Chapter XII

IT was Sunday at the Hawkins homestead. The softly blowing winds hummed anthems in the corn fields and whispered creeds and prayers about the wheat heads. A robin chirped a psalm from its perch on the wood pile. The pigeons cooed matins from the stable roof. A bluejay, pluming its wings on a chicken coop, lightly shrilled a litany, and was answered by its mate in the orchard.

An old man, bent and twisted with rheumatism, came out from the straw thatched stable and turned toward the house. He moved with a shuffle and kept his eyes bent toward the ground. His cold, keen grey eyes were peering here and there as though in hopes of finding something. The sun was flaming over his left shoulder. Above his head a great mare's tail was fanned out across the heavens. All about him the birds and bees and beasts were worshipping Nature's God. But George Hawkins cared nothing for Nature, and but very little for its

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God. He stopped and turned something with his coarse boot. Then stooping stiffly he picked up a piece of snarled dirty string. His weazened face lighted as though he had come upon a treasure. He stood still, balancing on one foot until he had unsnarled it, then he rolled it up very carefully and shuffled on toward the house.

As he came up to the kitchen door he met Abner coming out. He was wearing his best clothes and was carrying a harness over his arm. The old man's face drew down in a frown. He reached out and nervously clutched the harness.

"Yer a goin' t' spile them new clothes, Abner," he exclaimed querulously. "Yeh've only worn 'em a year. Seems t' me yer gettin' mighty dandyish wantin' t' put 'em on all th' time."

His voice was shrill and had a quaver in it. There was a frown on Abner's face when he came out the door. It deepened. He spoke roughly.

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“Aw, shet up, an’ quit yer naggin’. Yeh’ll drive me crazy with yer eternal snuffin’. Th’ clothes er mine an’ I’ll wear ’em t’ plow in ef I feel like it.”

He started to push on. The old man stopped him.

“What yeh goin’ t’ do with ’at harness.”

“Hitch up.”

“Where yeh goin’?”

“Over t’ th’ Grahams.”

“What for?”

Abner scowled deeper yet.

“Aw let up,” he exclaimed with an oath. “I guess I’m over twenty-one an’ haint tied down t’ leadin’ strings no longer.”

The old man nervously twisted the string in his stiff fingers.

“Well, yeh c’n jes’ put ’at harness back where yeh found it. Th’ ole one’s in th’ stable.”

Abner bit his lips.

“I aint agoin’ t’ drive over there with that ole harness. It’s all comin’ t’ pieces an’ looks ’uz though it belonged t’ a lot o’ paupers.”

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“It’s good ’nuff fer me,” scolded the old man. “’N I guess it’s good ’nuff for you, least-wise yeh’ll have t’ put up with it. Yer gettin’ t’ be th’ most ’stravagant feller I ever see. Yeh’d ha’ me in th’ porehouse ef I didn’t watch out, an’ it’s agoin’ t’ be stopped.”

“What’s the use o’ bein’ so Damned stingy, Dad,” Abner growled, sulkily. “Folks ud think yeh was starvin’ t’ death t’ hear yeh talk. I’m gettin’ sick of it.”

The old man bristled up.

“Yeh take that harness back where yeh foun’ it. I guess I’m runnin’ this farm yet, an’ it’s goin’ t’ be run econom’cal.”

Abner turned back with an oath. The old man followed him into the kitchen and very carefully placed in a table drawer the string he had picked up.

His old wife was sitting in a straight backed chair by the window. Her red, misshapen hands were folded in her lap. She was gazing vacantly out the window to where the bluejay was flirting his tail from the chicken coop. She

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was hollow chested and pale, and had the worn hectic look of a consumptive. Now and then she would give utterance to a hacking cough which she vainly attempted to stifle. Then she was taken with a paroxysm of coughing. When it left her she was completely exhausted and she pressed her hands over her sunken breast and sighed.

“Seems like my cough’s gittin’ worse,” she said feebly when she regained her breath.

Hawkins did not answer her. He was taking off his boots and putting on a pair of ragged carpet slippers.

“I hope ’taint nahthin ser’us,” she added appealingly.

A frown was her only reply. Hawkins rubbed some home grown tobacco between his palms and pressed it into a worn cob pipe. His wife summoned up more courage and spoke pleadingly.

“I b’lieve ef yeh’d git me sum sIRRUP nex’ time yeh go t’ town it ’ud help me some. Seems like I cudn’t stan’ this cough much longer.

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It's jes' wearin' me all out. Some way I can't do my work like I ust t'. I git tired right off."

Hawkins settled himself comfortably in a chair and closed his eyes.

"Won't yeh git me some sirrup, Pa?"

He opened his eyes with a frown. His teeth came together with a snap. He spoke testily.

"Seems like yeh're allus wantin' med'cine. Ef I'd get yeh all th' truck yeh ask fer I'd keep m'self pore. Here I am tryin' t' 'con'mize all I kin an' you want t' spen' all I c'n save buyin' med'cines 'at don't do nobody no good. I don't think there's nahthin' th' matter with yeh any how. Fur's I c'n see yeh look jes' 's well's yeh ever did. It's all in yeh're imagination an' I don't think it's my duty t' humour yeh in it!"

He shut his eyes again. His wife sighed feebly and looked out at the bluejay.

There was a knock at the door. The old man gave a snarl of irritation and shuffling forward opened it. He found Hi Simms there.

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"I want t' see yeh," said Simms shortly. He turned and led the way to the wood-pile. Hawkins shambled after him.

"How're yeh gettin' 'long, Hi?" the old man asked as he leaned against the pile.

"Begin cuttin' next week, guess. I want t' tell yeh somepin'."

"All right. What d'ye think th' corn 'll yield, fifty bushels?"

"Mor'n that, guess." Simms shifted about uneasily. "Miss Simpkins an' th' brat died las' night," he said suddenly.

"Huh! How're things looking 'bout th' place?"

"All right. Th' brat died right after th' ole woman did."

"Too bad. Wist yeh'd begin cuttin' soon's yeh can. I stand in need o' some cash. Made Thompson a las' offer for that medder o' his an' guess he'll take me up."

"Seems like they caught more cold out in th' fowg that night," Simms continued looking at the ground.

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"How's th' wheat doin'."

"Pret' well. Simpkins 's in a pret' bad way. Folks say he's likely t' lose his mind."

For the first time the old man betrayed an interest in the fate of the Simpkinses.

"Good lan!" he exclaimed. "It's a good thing I foreclus. Ef he'd agone insane there might a been trouble. Had t' been a gardeen pinte an' no tellin' how much bother. Might a los' th' crop, too."

"Ef I'd a known they didn't have no place t' go that night I'd a let 'em stayed in th' house. Ther want no hurry 'bout gettin out fer's we'se concerned," Simms said uneasily.

"I tried t' do th' best I cud afford t' by em," the old man said virtuously. "But Simpkins 'uz so pig headed he wouldn't do nahthin! I offered t' let 'im stay in th' house fer a reason'ble rent, but he wouldn't do that neither. He cud a gone t' th' county farm, but he wouldn't do that neither. I did th' best I cud."

Simms backed up against the wood pile.

"Say," he growled with a frown, "I don't

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like this thing, Hawkins. I haint no brute no more. Th' neighbours 'er feelin' pret' hard 'bout this thing an' say that you didn't do jes' right, puttin' 'em out way yeh did."

The old man straightened up. A flash came into his sunken eyes.

"Th' neighbours c'n go to thunder," he exclaimed sharply. "I guess I c'n do 'uz I please with my own. I didn't do nahthin' without th' sanction o' th' law. I haint a askin' no favours o' none o' th' neighbours an' they don't need t' trouble any 'bout my affairs, an' ef yeh hear eny more talk yeh tell 'em so too."

He turned and shambled back toward the house. Simms opened his mouth as though to call him, but he closed it again and leaping the fence walked away across the fields. Just as Hawkins reached his door Lilt Murdock came around the corner of the house.

"I want t' see yeh, Hawkins," he shouted.

Lilt spoke sharply. There was a gleam in his eyes and an expression on his face fairly fierce.

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"What d'yeh want?" the old man asked, testily.

"I want yeh t' understand first of all," Lilt exclaimed, "That I haint here from none o' my choosin'. Ridgeby 'uz bound 'at I shud come an' give yeh warnin' so I come. Ef I'd a had my way I wouldn't a come near yeh, leastways not till everything 'uz fixed."

The vehemence with which Lilt spoke startled the old man. His eyes opened.

"W-why, w-w-what's th' matter?" he asked, the quaver in his voice increasing.

"Mis' Simpkins an' th' baby died las' night."

"Yes, yes," faltered the old man. "Simms 'uz jes' a tellin' me. Too bad. Too bad. Course I'll come t' th' funeral. I allus did like Mis' Simpkins an' allus did what I cud fer'em."

Lilt folded his arms and glared at him.

"Well you'd better not come near t' th' funeral. Th' closter yeh lay still th' better it'll be fer your old bones. Folks er gettin' pretty well worked up over this thing an' there's apt t' be trouble."

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Hawkins began to tremble.

“Why—Why, I haint done nahthin’.”

“Nahthin! Nahthin,” cried Lilt, reaching out as though to clutch him. “Why yeh ole wretch yeh murdered ’em, an’ there’s them in this county’ at ’ud like t’ see yeh hang fer it, an’ they’re talkin’ o’ doin’ it, too.”

The old man turned pale. He felt his knees growing weak under him. He caught at the door post for support.

“Why what d’yeh mean?” he asked. His voice was faint and husky.

“Why, didn’t yeh rob Simpkins of all he had in th’ world,” asked Lilt. “An’ ’en turn him an his family out in th’ road t’ die. What d’ I mean? I mean jes’ what I said, ’at you murdered Mis’ Simpkins an’ the baby. An’ ef yeh don’t go t’ Hell fer it may I never go t’ Heaven.”

The old man’s face became livid. He tottered to the door and sank down on the step.

“I—I didn’t mean t’ do n-nahthin’,” he whimpered. “I did jes’ what th’ law ’lows.”

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"Th' law! Th' law!" screamed Lilt. "Damn th' law, when it gets into th' hands o' skunks like you. It's justice we're talkin' 'bout. An' ef I don't miss my guess you'll see a little justice done fore mornin'."

"Why, I cud a tuk th' farm six months ago," said Hawkins faintly. "But I tried t' be easy on 'em."

"Tried t' be easy on 'em," sneered Lilt. "What was yeh waitin' fer but t' have Simpkins get th' crop all ready t' cut."

"I didn't mean it that way."

"Yes you did."

"Mis' Simpkins 'uz sick a long time' fore that."

"Yes she killed herself workin' in th' fields in hopes they cud save 'nuff that way t' make sure on th' mortgage. Th' cold she caught in th' road that night yeh turned 'em out 'uz what finished her though. She'd a died that night ef we hadn't taken 'em in at Ridgeby's."

"They cud agone t' th' pore house," said the old man doggedly.

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"Pore house, huh!"

"I didn't turn 'em out, nohow," Hawkins continued. "They cud a stayed for a reasonable rent, but I never seen s' bull headed a man 'uz Simpkins. Ef I remember it I said they cud stay uz long uz they wanted t'. I know I told 'em there want no hurry 'bout gettin out."

"Simpkins says diff'runt."

"Come t' think of it I remember tellin' em they cud have th' house rent free durin' th' winter an' cud have what corn they wanted t' feed th' cow. I'm sure 'bout it now 'at I come t' think 'bout it. I'm sure I did."

The pallor began to leave the old man's face and he brightened up considerably.

"I mus' say 'at yeh've got a mighty convenient mem'ry," frowned Lilt. "It's jes' like yer conscience."

"I'm sure they cudn't blame me none," Hawkins exclaimed with an air of relief, as he got up from the door-step. "I'm sure I did all 'at a Christian cud be expected t' do! I even offered Simpkins work, but he 'uz too shif'les t' take it. He never did mount t' much."

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“Look here, you old Geezer,” shouted Lilt, wrathfully shaking his fist in the old man's face. “I allus thought yeh was the meanes' cuss in Hawkins county, but darned if yeh haint the worst specimen in th' State o' Ioway. I've got a good min' t' punch yeh a few times an' go home without tellin' yeh what I cum fer.”

“Well, what d' yeh cum fer?” the old man asked querulously.

“I cum up here t' tell yeh 'at 'uz soon 'uz th' neighbours hearn' 'at Mis' Simpkins an' th' baby 'uz dead they got s' riled up over it 'at they're talkin' o' gettin' up a crowd an' comin' over here an' givin' yeh a coat o' tar an' feathers. Some of 'em wants t' hang yeh an' be done with it. I'm one o' that kind.”

Hawkins sank down again. His face blanched. His teeth began to chatter.

“Ef they come round here I'll have th' law on 'em,” he whimpered. “I'll have th' law on 'em. I'm an hones' cit'zen, an' hain't done nahthin', an' I'll have th' law on 'em.”

He spoke feebly. His eyes were filled with fright.

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"Ridgeby sent me up here to warn yeh," Lilt continued. "Ridgeby said himself yeh ought t' be dealt with, but he allus was chicken hearted."

"Ridgeby 'd better not be talkin' that way 'bout me," Hawkins chattered. "Why, I've done him favours."

"Yeh never done him uz big a favour uz he's doin' you right now," Lilt answered hotly.

"Why, I've loaned him money when he needed it mighty bad," whined the old man.

"Yes, yeh loaned it t' him fer eight per cent. intrust, an' took a mor'gage on th' bes' farm in th' state," sneered Lilt. "I s'pose yeh'll be turnin' him out t' die next."

"No, I'll be easy on him," Hawkins answered, rubbing his eyes. "I feel kinder like kin t' Ridgeby seein' Abner's goin' t' marry Sibley."

"I wouldn't let that idee worry me none," Lilt said, as he turned away. "I don't b'lieve yeh'll ever have Sibley Ridgeby fer a daughter-in-law."

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The old man watched Lilt until he disappeared down the road. Then he tried to get upon his feet, but he sank down again. His fright had overcome him. He sat staring vacantly ahead of him. Lilt had said that he was a murderer and that a mob was coming to lynch him. He trembled. But he knew that he had done nothing wrong. He had done less than the law would have allowed. He was sure he had told Simpkins that he could stay in the house as long as he wanted to. Yes, he was sure he had. He had intended to do so anyway. They could not blame him for what had happened. Mis' Simpkins and the baby would have died anyway. He had acted like a Christian. Yes, he was sure he had acted like a Christian.

With an effort he got feebly upon his feet. He was startled by a piping voice at his side.

“They laid down jes’ like little dogs an’ died,” it called. “Yes, they laid down jes’ like little dogs an’ died.”

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His thin blood started into activity at the words. He felt it boiling in his brain.

“They laid down jes’ like little dogs an’ died.” Then a merry laugh.

The old man turned fiercely. Crazy Bet was already disappearing down the lane. He gazed wrathfully after her.

“They laid down jes’ like little dogs an’ died.”

The laugh that came after it sounded in his ears wild and shrill, like the ghastly, ghoulisn shriekings of demons in Hell.

He tottered to the stable and with trembling hands hitched up a team and drove rapidly down the road. That maniacal laugh still rang in his ears.

Chapter XIII

NEWTON'S wound healed slowly. It had proved to be much more serious than had at first been supposed. The heavy blade of the knife had pierced the inner membrane of the lungs, narrowly missing the heart. The painful ride back to Ridgeby's had resulted in a great loss of blood, and the long time that elapsed until the arrival of the village doctor had aggravated the hurt. Sibley's care and her mother's simple dressing had warded off the most serious complications. Sibley's mind had been in a tumult on the evening that Newton was hurt. When she saw him fall her first impulse had been to rush to him. It seemed that every instinct in her being was urging her to his side. She had almost obeyed them. But she remembered that she was to marry Abner Hawkins and that the increasing temptation might not overpower her she had rushed from the barn and started on a feverish walk for home. She had covered but a small part of

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the distance when she was overtaken by the wagon in which Newton had been placed to take him home. Lilt was driving it, walking the horses slowly and peering eagerly ahead into the darkness in the endeavour to avoid as many of the rough places as possible. She had climbed into the wagon, and seating herself on the box floor had held Newton's head all the way. It had been a wonderful relief to her to find that he was not dead. During the long drive and through the tedious wait until the doctor came she had been in a fever of suspense. Would he live? The thought throbbed in her brain until it seemed to her that her head must split. Yet she wondered why she cared so much. He was only her father's hired hand, and besides she was going to marry Abner Hawkins. When the doctor said that he would live her heart gave a bound and she almost shouted. She stole away to her room and cried.

For over a month now he had lain white and wan, unable to little more than move his hands

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for fear of starting a hemorrhage. Mrs. Simpkins and the baby had died and been laid away with simple rites in the cross roads graveyard. Simpkins himself had wandered away, no one knew whither. The heat of anger against old George Hawkins had gone with him, and the county had settled down to its wonted routine. Two of those concerned in the assault on Newton disappeared right after it and the rest denied any knowledge of the stabbing. Law, in the country districts, is clumsy at the best and the matter was dropped.

Sibley devoted herself to Newton. Her mother relieved her of all care in the housework and she spent her entire time by his bedside. At first it was an arduous task. As long as his life hung in the balance she scarcely slept. The others offered to relieve her but she persistently refused their good offices. The crimson faded from her cheeks, the blue of her eyes became shaded by dark rings, she was not so plump as she had been, but she refused to resign

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her place to another. In vain her mother worried and Ridgeby fussed, Old Reuben's cackled advice was lost, Lilt's repeated requests to be allowed to share her watch were declined.

Newton was too weak to talk; besides, the physician had forbidden it. The slightest exertion might tear the wound open again and start a flow of blood that would prove fatal. But he followed Sibley with his eyes. As long as he was awake he kept them bent upon her. It seemed to put nature into the room to see her there. In her eyes he saw the blue of the skies, in her smile the sweet sunshine, in her voice, when she now and then hummed a song, he heard the sighing of the wheat fields. He saw all of these in Sibley now as before he had seen Sibley in all of them. Once he tried to speak to her, but she stopped the words with her hand. He expended his strength in kissing it. She chided him with a smile, but the suspicion of a blush came upon her cheeks. Newton tried again to speak but that time she did not put her fingers to his lips but to her own. He frowned his disappointment.

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It was three days after he was hurt before he came to consciousness, but all that time he had heard Sibley's frightened voice, as she entreated him to run, ringing in his ears. Sometimes it was as the singing of countless birds, again it was the silvery chime of many bells in tune. Again it was the rippling of waves, or it swelled into the rolling music of the spheres. Various forms it took; but it was always Sibley's voice.

The first thing of which he was aware when he crept back to consciousness was the touch of a soft hand upon his forehead. How cool it was and how lightly it rested upon his brow. He wondered whose it was and he started to open his eyes. As he did so he felt the flutter of a breath on his cheek. He raised his lids and found himself looking deep into Sibley's eyes. She drew quickly back. Had he been fully conscious he would have seen that a blush crimsoned her cheeks a deeper red. He closed his eyes. In a few moments he felt the hand sweep lightly over his forehead again and, as he did not stir, rest there. He kept his eyes shut and sank to sleep.

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Now he was getting better. His iron constitution had triumphed and he was slowly regaining his strength. It was a pleasure to feel the life coming into his limbs again. He held up his great arms. How powerful they had been a month ago. How feeble they were now. Before he could have twisted a horse-shoe out of shape, now a child could have held him down.

It made him happy to feel the strength coming back again, but there was something that took the delight out of it and sometimes made him wish that he could always remain weak and speechless. The more he improved in health the less he saw of Sibley. She relaxed her sleepless watch as soon as it was assured that all danger was passed and she gave her place up more and more to her mother. Her interest in him seemed to pale in an inverse ratio as he regained his health. What little services she did him now were done in a perfunctory way and she escaped as soon thereafter as she could. Now and then she would sit by his bed for an hour or so in the afternoon and

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read to him, but if he essayed to draw her attention away from her book and attempt to have her talk with him she left him abruptly. At length he saw her scarcely at all. If he wished anything and called it was always her mother who came, or even Reuben. If it was in the evening Ridgeby and Lilt would wait on him. Lilt did not make a bad nurse. He would sit by Newton's side for two or three hours in the evenings and read to him in his clumsy fashion, or tell him the news of the county as he heard it from the other hired hands. Lilt took Newton's injury considerably to heart. He considered himself largely responsible for it as Newton would not have been drawn into the *mélee* had he not been so "bustin'" for a fight. He never tired of describing how Newton bore himself. Knight of Old never had a more faithful minstrel to sing his prowess.

Newton knew one afternoon, from the sounds in the kitchen, that Sibley was alone. He could hear her singing "Bon Ami" as she

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wiped the dinner dishes. Her mother had gone to a neighbour's and Reuben had been sent to the village on an errand. Newton could not resist the temptation to call her. A moment later she opened the door and looked in.

"Can't you come in? I'm lonesome," he pleaded.

"Haven't you your thoughts for company?" she asked carelessly.

"No, they are out there with you. They won't stay in here."

She laughed lightly.

"I can't say that they fill the room up very much. I'm afraid that you will have to continue being lonesome. I can't leave my work just now."

The expression on his face became more earnest.

"Come in just for a moment," he pleaded. "I want to talk to you."

She hesitated, then went up to the bed.

"What do you want?" she asked in a matter of fact tone that did not at all fit in with his mood.

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“ I want to thank you for all you have done for me, Miss Sibley,” he said earnestly. “ I have not said anything before because I did not know how to say it. I can not say it now as well as I would like. But I would not have you think me ungrateful.”

“ Oh, is that all you wanted?” she laughed carelessly. “ Did you bring me in here away from my work just to tell me that? Well I'm too busy to stay and listen to it. Mother will be back pretty soon and you can tell it to her. She is the one that has taken care of you. I have done very little except to help her now and then.”

She started to turn away. Newton caught her by the dress and held her. She turned back with a slight frown upon her face. Newton saw it and it hurt him.

“ Frown if you want to,” he said. “ But, I will hold you here until I tell you what I want to. I haven't very much strength left but I will use what I have.”

She smiled carelessly.

“ Well go on and talk if you want to, I

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can't stop that," she said with a laugh, that was intended to disarm him.

"You are the one who has taken care of me," he said, seriously. "Can't I see how pale you are, can't I see that you are thin and worn? Don't I know what caused it? It was taking care of me when I was likely either to live or die with the odds on the wrong side. I knew that you were with me all the time. I could not see you but I felt that you were there. I believe that I should have died had you left me. That I am alive now is owing to you and now you don't want me even to thank you. You are offsetting all your kindnesses with cruelty."

Sibley tried to keep the careless look on her face but failed. The light smile died away and she bit her lips nervously. She looked toward the door.

"What I did was very little. You magnify it. I could not have done less for anyone," she said slowly. "I could not leave you to die. I would not do that even to a dog."

"I do not delude myself with the idea that you did it simply because it was I," he returned

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with a note of bitterness in his tone. "I know that you would do as much for a tramp picked up in the road. In fact that was what you were kind to in me, a tramp that Ridgeby picked up in the road. But because I know that you would have done the same to anyone does not release me from my debt of gratitude. I hope that nothing will ever arise in your life that will give me the opportunity to repay it, but if there should I shall not fail to do it."

"You owe me nothing," Sibley said seriously without looking at him. "You must remember that it was I who was largely responsible for your hurt. If you had died I should have felt that I had murdered you."

"You responsible for my hurt?" he exclaimed. "Pray how is that?"

There came a quaver in Sibley's voice when she replied. She was also winking hard to keep back the tears.

"My coquetry aroused Abner's jealousy to such an extent that he was beside himself. He swore to me that he would find some way to revenge himself on you. When you were

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wrestling I was in an agony for I did not know what he might do. I feared that something would happen. It was all my fault. If I had confined myself to Abner's care as I should have done nothing would have happened and you would be strong and well instead of lying here helpless. I should have been heartless indeed not to give you some small care after what I had done. It was my coquetry that did it."

Newton caught his breath. That was a shot that cut him to the quick. He had forgotten that Sibley was to marry Abner Hawkins. The thought came to him with a force that it had never possessed before. He looked up at her. She had never looked so pretty to him. She to marry Abner Hawkins? He wondered if those were tears welling up to his eyes. His face became very sober. Hers caught the expression as a mirror and became very sober too.

"Did you dance with me that night," he asked slowly, "simply out of a spirit of coquetry?"

She clutched nervously at her apron. Her face paled.

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"Perhaps not exactly that," she said after a moment. "But the result was the same. I should not have done it."

He looked at her earnestly for a moment.

"Are you sorry that you did?" he asked.

"Of course I am," she answered. "See what has happened."

"I don't care what has happened," he cried impatiently. "I would pay the same price again for the same pleasure."

Sibley's face lighted for a moment. Then it darkened again. When she replied it was with a forced voice. She tried to pull away.

"Now you are talking nonsense," she said.

"Nonsense or no nonsense," he cried desperately, holding her back. "If ever again I have the opportunity of purchasing so great a pleasure from you I will pay as great a price."

"No you will not," she replied firmly."

"I won't?"

"No, for I will not let you."

"What do you mean?" he asked with a drawn breath.

She hesitated for a moment as though trying

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to gain complete control of herself before she answered him.

“I mean that from this time on we must not be even friends. Abner’s jealousy is so great that I cannot have even a friend. I have no right to anger him.”

Newton raised himself on his elbow.

“Must I give you up entirely,” he cried wildly, “to that man, that savage, that boor, that dog, that low born whelp——”

Sibley’s face became pale as the dress she wore. She gave a quick gasp. Then she drew herself up and stopped his tirade with a gesture.

“Remember,” she said firmly, “that whatever he is, I am his promised wife.”

She pulled away from him and hurried out of the room closing the door with a slam behind her. Newton sank back exhausted. Sibley stumbled to her room and stifled a flood of tears in a pillow.

Chapter XIV

DURING the next three days Newton did not see Sibley. He did not even hear her voice. It was her usual custom to sing about her work, but she did not sing any more. He had to content himself with listening to the sound of her footsteps.

He was gazing gloomily up at the ceiling weaving Sibley's face in the shadows when Lilt tramped in. He had just finished the chores for the night. He carefully closed the door behind him and stood awkwardly clinging to the knob. He shuffled uneasily about on his feet.

"Say, Newt," he exclaimed in a half whisper, "Didn't yeh lay in a white shirt a while ago?"

Newton replied that he did.

"Well say," Lilt continued as though fearing he might be overheard, "Would yeh min' lendin' me th' loan of it fer a spell t'night?"

"Why, of course not," Newton laughed back. "What's up?"

"Sh!" Lilt cautioned nervously, his face

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flushing. "Don't talk s' darned loud or they'll hear yeh," pointing with his thumb over his shoulder. "Where's th' shirt?"

"Hanging up in the closet. What's the matter, Lilt?"

"Nawthin'. Only thought I might slick up a bit. May go over t' th' Grahams's after a while.

"Haint been over there in some time," he added as he brought the shirt out from the closet. "Got any objections t' my changin' in here?"

"No, go ahead. What's in the wind anyway?"

Lilt became too much occupied in making the change of garments to heed the question. A quizzical smile came over Newton's face.

"You had better 'fess up,' Lilt. This business of your putting on a white shirt must mean something serious."

Lilt's face was buried in the depths of the shirt as he pulled it over his head.

"Yeh haven't got a collar, too, have yeh?" he asked when his head appeared in sight.

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Newton laughed uproariously. He confessed that he possessed such a thing and that it was at his service. Lilt's face became very crimson.

"What yeh laughin' at?" he growled. "Yeh'll bust 'at lung o' yourn ef yeh think it's s' danged funny."

"Oh come, own up Lilt," shouted Newton. "What are you going after, a wife?"

"Don't talk s' danged loud," Lilt whispered desperately. "Folks 'll hear yeh. Where's th' collar?"

"In the drawer. Who's the girl, Sue Graham?"

"None o' yer danged business. Got a necktie?"

"Look here," Newton exclaimed with mock seriousness. "I'm willing you should wear my clothes, but I demand to know where they are going. I think I ought to be informed what sort of an affair I am aiding and abetting."

"Well I'm a bettin' yeh don't find out nahthin' bout it. Where's th' tie?"

"In that box. You had better let me arrange it for you."

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Lilt brought it out and knelt sheepishly by the bed while Newton deftly tied it in a neat bow.

“Yeh must be ust t’ tyin’ them things,” Lilt said in admiration as he surveyed it in the glass.

“You look like a city gallant,” Newton returned without noticing the question. “You will find a pair of cuffs in the drawer. You might as well go the whole hog. You won’t tell me anything?”

“Not a danged thing,” Lilt growled as he awkwardly put on the cuffs. “Wist I had some way o’ shinin’ up them boots. They look mighty scrumpish. There haint no way o’ doing it now.” He looked down at his great boots reproachfully.

Lilt took hold of the door knob and started to turn it. Then he changed his mind.

“Guest I’d better git out th’ winder,” he said starting toward it. “Sibley’s got eyes like a minx an’ is a horrible tease. Shet up yer laughin’, ’taint s’ danged funny as yeh think it is.”

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

Newton mastered himself with a struggle. As Lilt threw up the window he drew down his face.

“Come back here a moment, Lilt,” he said. “I want to speak to you.”

Lilt looked over his shoulder. Newton held out his hand. Lilt came awkwardly toward the bed and grasped the hand gingerly. Newton felt another laugh breaking out, but he stifled it.

“You can’t hide it, Lilt, so where is the use in trying. I know what you are up to. Those clothes—” A grin spread over his face that threatened to explode. “Good luck to you. She will say yes all right, I think. Don’t take no for an answer. Keep a stiff upper lip and don’t get down-hearted whatever happens.”

Newton pressed Lilt’s hand warmly. Lilt’s flushed attempt to answer him ended in a stammer. He turned back to the window and clambered out.

“Say,” he whispered back, “Don’t yeh say nahthin’ t’ th’ folks.”

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He took a few steps, then stopped. He stood still a moment then returned to the window.

"Say Newt," he whispered hoarsely, "It's mighty good o' yeh t' wish me luck, an' don't yeh let Ab Hawkins bother yeh a mite. I'm much obliged fer th' clothes." He turned away hastily.

The laughter in Newton's heart died with the words and he sank back on his pillow with a sigh.

Lilt made his way carefully to the stable and putting a bridle on one of the horses led him carefully down the lane, casting anxious glances toward the house. When he was well out of hearing he mounted and started his horse on a trot down the road. He tried to whistle but the notes died on his lips. He did not feel like making a noise. There was an uncertain feeling about his heart that made him think it was likely to pop up in his mouth every minute and a shaky feeling in his legs that took all the whistle out of him. He squirmed about uneasily. He felt awkward in Newton's

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stiff linen. He almost wished he had left it off.

He reached Graham's gate. He started to turn in but his heart failed him and he rode on down the road. He went on for about a quarter of a mile when he turned his horse back and rode past the gate about the same distance in the other direction. Then he faced round again. He came up to the gate.

"I haint goin' t' let no girl scare me out," he muttered and turned in.

"Hullo!" he shouted.

The door opened and Luke Graham put his head out.

"Hullo!" he shouted. "That you, Lilt? Drive right down t' th' stable. I'll be there in a jiffy. Sue," he called over his shoulder, "Here's Lilt."

Lilt dismounted and led his horse toward the straw-thatched stable. Luke joined him in a moment. After putting up the horse he led the way back to the house.

There was a general clamour when they en-

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

tered. The room was filled with Grahams of assorted sizes. They spied out the grandeur of Lilt's dress the moment he came in.

"Hullo, Lilt. Where'd yeh get th' shirt?" shouted Jim, the eldest.

"An' a collar an' necktie, too," giggled Jane.

"Hain't he swell?" shrieked one of the little Grahams.

"Ef I'd a knowed yeh had on them togs out there in th' stable I'd a rolled yeh on th' floor," Luke yelled.

"Oh, Sue," shouted another of the little Grahams. "Come out here an' see yer beau. He's drest up t' kill."

Lilt turned a variety of colours. He fingered the collar awkwardly.

"Guess a feller c'n fix up a bit once in a while," he said. "There haint no use o' his lookin' like a rowdy all th' time."

Two or three of the little Grahams tried to climb on his shoulders. One of them succeeded in reaching his necktie and ruined the sym-

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

metry of its arrangement, a feat which was greeted with cheers by all the other Grahams. Lilt shook the children off a little roughly. Ma Graham came in and restored order with a few slaps and shakes. The tumult subsided, Lilt wished he had left the linen in Newton's drawer and had climbed in with it. The drawer was small but he was sure that there was room for him in it without overcrowding.

Sue had disappeared as soon as Lilt's arrival was announced. She came in and walked up to him. She did not dare look at the others. Lilt felt the blood rushing into his face again. He took her hand awkwardly and held it for a moment as though he did not know what to do with it. Then he suddenly dropped it.

"How nice yeh look, Lilt," she said.

"You look mighty pretty yerself," he stammered back.

Lilt gazed at the girl in admiration. Her round red cheeks flushed and she turned her big blue eyes toward the floor. There was an awkward pause. Graham himself came in and

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

taking off his boots put his feet on a chair.

"How's Ridgeby gettin' on," he asked. "Corn most in?"

"Pret' near. Finish next week, guess. Been delayed some by Newt's bein' sick." Lilt returned.

"How's he gettin' 'long?"

"Pret' well. Be all right in a couple of weeks, guess."

"Colt got over his lameness yet?"

"Yep, he's all right. How's yer bay mare?"

"Pret' bad. Got t' let her run fer th' winter. Win's bad. How's Mis' Ridgeby?"

"Roomatiz botherin' her some. She's peart' 'nuff barrin' that. Got yer corn most in?"

"Luke an' Jim's just finishin' up. Think yeh'll get through t'morrow, Jim?"

"Guess so, ef Lilt's clothes haint upset me so I can't sleep none t'night."

There was a general laugh in which everyone joined except Lilt and the girl.

"Yeh don't have t' fix up that a way jes' t'

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

come over here," said Ma Graham. "We're jes' uz glad t' see yeh in common clothes."

The girl sat with her hands in her lap and said nothing.

"Say Sue," Lilt exclaimed suddenly as there came a lull in the conversation, "I'm thirsty. Let's go an' get a drink out t' th' well."

"Jes's well send one o' th' young'uns," put in Ma Graham. "Teddy run out t' th' well an' draw a fresh bucket o' water."

The boy went off reluctantly. Lilt glared after him.

"Ridgeby goin' t' put in any winter wheat?" Graham asked.

"Guess he'll plow up th' secont medder an' put that in wheat, an' seed down th' ole field."

"When yeh goin' t' thrash?" asked Jim.

"Soon's Herrick gets round. He's pret' busy."

The boy came in with the water. Lilt drank a dipper full. He took as long a time to it as he could and managed to throw Sue a glance under cover of it.

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

"Say, Sue," he asked, "Any o' them everlastin's left in th' bed. All I need t' fix out these fixings is a bokay."

"Why didn't we think 'bout it before," chimed in Ma Graham. "Julie run out in th' yard and pick a bunch for Lilt."

The girl was up and gone before Lilt could interpose an objection.

"D'yeh hear 'bout th' big coon Jake Anson ketched las' week?" Luke asked.

"Naw."

"He treed a whopper down in Keller's holler in th' cottonwood. He says it's th' bigges' ketched yet this year."

"Jake says he seen a cat that night, too," put in Jim. "It got away from him though."

"Say Sue, let's take a walk," Lilt exclaimed desperately. "Come on, yeh don't need no hat."

He escaped out the door. The girl joined him and closed the door behind her.

"It's too nice t' stay in th' house," Lilt said.

"'Tis pretty nice."

"Le's walk down th' road a piece."

He took her arm. It was a round arm and

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

muscular. All of the girl's charms were of the strong variety. Her form was robust and well knit. Her hands were large, but toil had not yet ruined their shapeliness. Her face was open and wore a cheerful expression. Her red cheeks and big blue eyes made it pleasing. Her hair was drawn back and fell in a heavy braid behind.

They walked some ways without speaking. The moon shone down on them from an unclouded sky. The stars were brilliant.

"How's Sibley?" Sue asked at last.

"She's all right," Lilt answered mechanically.

It was some little time before either of them spoke again. They did not want to talk about any one else and did not dare to talk of themselves. Lilt kept his eyes bent toward the moon. Sue's eyes were turned toward the ground. Once in a while she would steal a glance at Lilt.

"How bright th' moon is t'night," she said at last, looking up.

"Yes, I've been lookin' at it," Lilt answered.

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“Wonder ef th’ moon’s made o’ green cheese like they say ’tis. Ef I thought it was b’lieve I’d get married an’ go up there t’ live.”

There was another pause. They were walking very slowly. They hung close by the side of the road to avoid the dust. The path was narrow and they were compelled to keep very close together.

“Don’t b’lieve I’ll stay with Ridgeby much longer,” Lilt said slowly after a while.

“Yeh ain’t goin’ away are yeh?” she asked. There was a slight tremble in her voice and she looked harder at the ground.

“Don’t know exactly, I’ll stay with Ridgeby durin’ th’ winter an’ light out in th’ spring. Newt’s a good feller an’ I guess I’ll let him have my place.”

Sue’s eyes lost sight of the ground from the tears that came into them.

“I’ve got a chance t’ stay but I don’t know whether I will or not.”

She hung closer to his arm but did not make a reply.

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

"Ain't nobody round here 'at cares whether I stay here er not."

"P'raps there is."

"I don't know who 'tis."

"I don't s'pose yeh care but I'd be real sorry t' have yeh go away."

"Would yeh?" Lilt's voice was hopeful.

"Course I would. Haint we had some good times t'gether?"

"I have."

"So've I."

"I don't want t' go," he said slowly.

"I don't want yeh t' go either."

Lilt began to forget about his white shirt and collars and cuffs. He was becoming himself again.

"I've got a good chance t' take th' Jackson place for a reason'ble rent an' set up fer m'self. I've been thinkin' some o' doin' it."

"Oh, that ud be nice," Sue cried joyfully. "That's only half a mile fr'm our place an' yeh could come over real often."

Lilt began to pick up courage.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

“Ridgeby’s been pret’ lib’rel with me an’ I’ve got over four hundred dollars saved up to buy tools with. It’s a good chance an’ I’d like t’ stay an’ take it.”

“I hope yeh do.”

“P’raps I will—Ef you want me too,” he added.

“Course I do.”

Lilt stopped and tightening his clasp on the girl’s arm turned her toward him. He braced back his shoulders. He looked fairly handsome in the moonlight.

“Aw, Darn it,” he exclaimed, “What’s th’ use o’ my hemmin’ an’ hawin’ like a scart cow? I’ve got somepin to say an’ I’m goin’ t’ say it ef it takes a laig. I ain’t got no idea o’ goin’ away. You couldn’t pull me away from this county with a ten-horse team, leastways not so long uz you’re here no how. I want t’ take th’ Jackson place an’ I want yeh t’ go in with me on sheers. What d’ye say?”

Sue began to tap her foot in the dust. Lilt waited an instant for her to reply then he hurried on.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

“I can't do things th' way they do in th' story books. I had a nice little speech all made up an' I've forgot every las' bit of it. But I haint fergot 'at you're th' prettiest girl in Hawkins county an' that I've been head over heels in love with yeh fer two years, so fer in, that nahthin' but my ears wuz stickin' out. I've been scart to death 'at somebody else 'ud come long an' get yeh fore I uz able t' do nothin'. I've worked like a nailer t' get a little somepin t'gether so I cud come t' yeh like a man. I haint got much now but I've got 'nuff t' start on. An' ef yeh'll marry me I'll be jes' uz good t' yeh uz I know how. I don't s'pose yeh will, but ef yeh don't I'll be th' worst cut up feller yeh ever see. Will yeh 'er won't yeh?”

Sue continued to pat the dust with her foot. The pleading was urgent and she was tempted to assent. The wind rose a little and the wheat field added an appeal. The corn on the other side of the road rustled an entreaty. Lilt was waiting.

“Hurry up an' tell me,” urged Lilt. “For

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

I don't think I can keep my arms from 'round yeh mor'n a minute longer."

She looked up at him.

"Can't yeh see I'm cryin'," she answered.

"An' couldn't see ef yeh did."

Chapter XV

LILT'S cheerful whistle aroused Newton the next morning. He stopped on his way out to the barn and opening Newton's door put his head in. He grinned sheepishly, winked very broadly and closed the door again. Then he went out to milk, still whistling shrilly. Newton smiled. Then his face became grave and he turned uneasily on his pillow.

"Lucky Lilt," he sighed. "I suppose he will be married in the spring—About the same time as Sibley. Pshaw!"

He threw his hands back of his head and tried to listen to Lilt shouting at the cows. He heard Sibley moving about the kitchen and Reuben's limping shuffle. A feeling of unrest came in his heart. He threw a pillow at the wall. Its mate followed it. He tossed back the bed clothes and got out upon the floor. He found himself to be very weak, but he managed to dress himself partly. Then he called Reuben and with his awkward assistance completed his toilet. Lilt came in with the milk pails.

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

"Help me out into the other room," Newton called.

"Hullo, Newt. Got up, have yeh," Lilt exclaimed lustily, coming to the door. "Well I'm most glad t' see yeh out. Most uz glad uz I am—"

He checked himself and stood gazing awkwardly at the floor while his face took on the hue of his hair.

He picked Newton up and carried him out to where a chair had been fixed for him by the kitchen window. Sibley's face lighted as she arranged it but she busied herself about the stove as Lilt carried Newton out.

"Want t' wras'le now?" Lilt laughed as he set his load down. "B'lieve I cud throw yeh ef I tried hard nuff."

"Wait about three weeks until I get about half my strength back and I will give you a tussle. I will be just about a match for you then."

"Haw, Haw, Haw!" shouted Lilt as he straightened up. "Yeh ain't got th' big head

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

ner nahthin' have yeh? Yeh must think yer a secont Samson."

Newton reached up and caught him by the chin.

"Well," he laughed, "I have laid hold on the jaw bone of an ass."

Ridgeby came up chuckling and bobbing his head.

"Got yeh that time, didn't he, Lilt? Yeh haint had yer tongue hurt none have yeh?" He chuckled again.

"Ef yed take my *advice*," cackled Reuben as he shuffled up, "Yeh wouldn't been in sech a hurry t' get up. I got stuck with a bay'net at Anteetem, an' yeh can't be too keerful."

Mrs. Ridgeby bustled about getting footstools and shawls. Only Sibley was quiet.

"We're mighty glad t' see yeh out here, Newton," Ridgeby said. "We've been spiling t' see yeh with us agin. Sibley haint et nahthin' since yeh wuz hurt an' we've all been kinder glum."

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He looked at Sibley leaning over the stove and chuckled and bobbed his head. A flush crept over the girl's face. Newton thought it was from the heat of the fire.

"Well, Lilt, aren't you going to tell us all about it now that it's settled?" Newton asked while they were eating breakfast.

Lilt stammered and choked. Then he grinned broadly.

"Guess 'twont intrest them none."

Newton thought it would.

"What's up Lilt?" asked Ridgeby. "'Taint nahthin' ser'us is it?"

Lilt blushed and hammered the table with his knife. Newton could not help laughing. Lilt turned on him.

"Shet up!" he shouted. "Yeh'll bust yer lung."

"'Taint nahthin'" he said turning back, "'Cept that I've decided t' go in with one of th' Grahams an' take th' Jackson place in th' spring an' run it on sheers."

Ridgeby nodded his head approvingly.

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"I'll be mighty sorry t' lose yeh, Lilt," he said, "But I'm glad t' see yeh striking out fer yer self. Yeh don't want t' alus be workin' for other folks. That's a good piece o' land an' yeh ought t' do well on it."

Lilt continued to hammer the table with his knife.

"Ef yeh'd take my *advice*," Reuben started.

"Who yeh goin' in with?" asked Ridgeby.

"One o' th' Grahams."

"Who, Luke?"

"Naw."

"Jim?"

"Naw."

"Hank?"

"Naw."

Sibley was smiling.

"I believe I am a better guesser," she said.

"Isn't it Sue?"

Lilt gave the table a parting pound.

"Yeh've guessed it."

There was an uproar. Ridgeby chuckled and bobbed his head. His wife laughed. Reuben

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cackled. Newton roared. Sibley extended her hand across the table.

“Good fer you. Good fer you,” chuckled Ridgeby. “Why didn’t yeh say yeh’s goin’ to get married an’ be done with it. I’m mighty glad of it. I guess yeh got th’ pick o’ the fam’ly.”

“Her ma says she’s th’ best housekeeper in th’ county,” said his wife.

“She’s a good girl all the way through, Lilt,” said Sibley, “And will make you the best kind of a wife. I think you are the luckiest man in Hawkins county.”

Newton could not help thinking of Abner Hawkins in that connection.

“Ef yeh’ll take my *advice*,” shrilled Reuben, “Yeh’ll be mighty keerful.”

“How’re yeh goin’ t’ stock th’ farm?” Ridgeby asked.

“I’ve saved up over four hundred dollars t’ buy tools with. Don’t expect t’ get much at first. Be a pret’ hard rub fer a while but I guess we can make it. Sue knows I haint got

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

much but she says she don't keer. She's willin' t' take a streak o' th' lean an' run her chances 'at th' fat 'll come after awhile."

A thoughtful look came over Ridgeby's face. He scratched the back of his ear.

"Tell yeh what I've got a good notion t' do, Lilt," he said after a moment. "Yeh've allus worked square for me. I never had a better hand, an' I wish I wuz in a place where I cud do somepin' fer yeh. But yeh know what a hard row I've had lately so I can't do much. I'm goin' t' give yeh yer pick o' two o' th' cows an' yeh can have th' colt. He'll be ready t' break in th' spring."

Lilt stammered his thanks.

"I am going to make your wife a present of about twelve of my chickens," said Sibley. "I have more than I can take care of."

"Yeh can take my bes' clothes t' get married in," quavered Reuben.

"Two o' my calves are yourn," Mrs. Ridgeby echoed.

Lilt brushed his great hands across his eyes

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and rising hastily from his chair strode out the door. Before they had recovered from their astonishment they heard him driving down the lane towards the fields.

"Ef he'd tuk my *advice* he'd a stayed an' got th' hull farm," drawled Reuben.

Mrs. Ridgeby had an errand at the village and Reuben hitched up the little mare and drove her down. Newton was left alone with Sibley.

He sat by the window and gazed out. A row of hives stood behind the house. He could see the bees flying in and out. He watched Sibley as she passed them on her way to feed the calves. She stood and watched the creatures as they eagerly sucked in the milk. Newton saw her shade her eyes and look across the fields. He wondered if she was looking out with the hope of seeing Abner Hawkins somewhere. In a moment she came back into the kitchen.

"Aren't you afraid of the bees," he asked, still looking out the window.

"Why?" Sibley asked carelessly.

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“I should think you would fear they would steal the honey from your lips.”

A suspicion of a blush crept into her cheeks. She was wiping the kitchen table and vented her feelings in the rubbing. Newton drummed on the window-sill. Evidently she did not intend to answer him. She gave the table a parting rub.

“I am afraid the honey would find a poor market.”

“Not unless the buyer could get it first hand. Have you any for sale?”

Sibley was just pouring boiling water from the kettle into the dishpan. She turned and looked toward him. He was gazing away across the swells to where he could see Lilt driving out of a corn field. She set the kettle back on the stove and started to roll up her sleeves. Newton caught the act from a faint reflection in the window glass. He turned around. Sibley's arms had not lost their fascination. He wished he were an artist that he might paint them. They were ideal, round,

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white, smooth, strong, perfectly formed. He thought of those arms around Abner Hawkins' neck. He shivered. The shiver made him reckless.

"You would look like a madonna in evening dress," he said. "Your arms would make a sensation in a ball room, they are so pretty."

"I didn't know that the Madonna was ever represented in evening dress," she returned tartly, plunging her arms deeper in the suds.

Newton looked out the window again and drummed on the sill. He saw Lilt driving up the lane. Catching sight of Newton he swung his hat around his head. Then he disappeared toward the barn.

"Happy Lilt," Newton sighed.

"He ought to be," returned Sibley. "Sue Graham is a good, sensible girl and not a bit afraid of hard work. Her head is not filled with a collection of silly notions and she is ready to take her share of the struggle that is ahead of them. Lilt could not have chosen a better girl for a wife. Lilt is a good fellow and

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will make her a good husband. I think he is the luckiest man in the county."

"I don't."

Sibley looked at Newton over her shoulder.

"You don't? Why not?"

"Because there is still a luckier one."

"Who?"

Newton felt a lump creeping up in his throat. There was a tremulous feeling about his heart.

"Abner Hawkins."

Sibley was just wiping a great platter. Perhaps the soap-suds made it slippery. It fell from her hands and crashed on the floor. She stood looking down at it while the hot blood rushed into her face. Her head swam. She bit her lips. Newton continued looking out the window. A mist had come before his eyes. Lilt was driving down the lane. Newton saw him indistinctly. He was wondering what made Sibley drop the platter. He did not dare look around. Sibley groped for a broom and swept up the pieces. Then she went on with her dishes.

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For half an hour Newton continued to gaze out the window. The sun was shining in on him. The summer was gone. The autumn had robbed the sunbeams of their power. The leaves were falling from the trees. They rustled about on the ground and were swirled up in eddies by the breeze. The wind had a mourning note in its voice as it sighed through the branches of the walnut trees as though it was singing a requiem to the green fields, which were slowly dying away in blotches of yellow stubble. The musical rustle of the corn had changed to a dry rattle and he could hear the cows crashing through the stalks. The wheat fields no longer whispered love songs to the breeze. A thrasher roared its varying notes somewhere in the distance. It was so far away that when the sparrows, quarrelling over the crumbs in the yard, chirped a little more shrilly than usual, the sound was drowned.

Newton turned away from the window. Sibley had finished the dishes and was just hanging the towel on a line behind the stove. New-

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ton watched her while she swept up the floor, pushed the chairs back in their places, put a touch here, straightened a picture there and then—rolled down her sleeves.

“What next, Busy-body?” he asked.

“Mending, Impudence,” she returned, laconically. She brought out a great basket filled with stockings and began work upon a coarse sock of Lilt’s.”

“If hearts could be mended as easily as stockings what a pleasant world this would be,” Newton said dreamily as he looked at her.

“Time is a good darner,” she answered carelessly.

“Yes, they say so,” he returned. “But his basket is so full and some of the rents so large that many perish before he gets to them.”

Sibley looked seriously at the hole she had begun on.

“I don’t think it will pay to mend that, the hole is too large,” she said, putting a pretty finger through it.

“That’s what Time says about some of the

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holes he comes across in his basket," Newton replied. "So he leaves the holes."

"I wish that Lilt would take his socks off before he ruins them," Sibley said in an attempt to turn the conversation into more practical channels. She was a little afraid of the direction in which the present one was tending.

"It's also too bad that hearts are not taken out of danger before the holes in them become irreparable," said Newton.

"The worst of it is," she replied, taking up a white stocking of her mother's, "That some persons are compelled by circumstances to keep their hearts where they are sure to be torn, and what is worse find themselves tearing the rents larger with their own fingers."

Newton looked at her narrowly, but he could not see her face very well. She was gazing at a small hole in the toe of her mother's stocking and seemed absorbed in its contemplation. He looked out the window again.

"I suppose I owe you an apology," he said turning abruptly toward her.

"You suppose you do?"

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"Yes, I'm not quite sure whether I do or not. Do I?"

"Yes, I think you do," she returned. "For trying to flatter me."

"Not having done that or even tried to I can not apologise for it. You know to what I am referring."

She did not reply but continued with her darning.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well?" she returned.

"Am I to apologise?"

"Do you want to?"

"No, not at all."

"Then your apology would not amount to much."

"It would amount to as much as most apologies do."

"Then I do not care for it."

He studied for a few moments.

"I should not have said what I did," he said slowly. "I was piqued. I forget that—that he was to be your husband."

A tremor ran over Sibley. Newton was not

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looking at her so he did not see it. He waited for her to reply but she was silent. He stole a glance at her. She was still looking at the hole in her mother's stocking.

"Well," he said after a moment. "Are you going to accept my apology?"

"Y-yes," she stammered.

"Am I forgiven?"

She wanted to look up at him. She wanted to rush over to him and put her arms around his neck and tell him that she had nothing for which to forgive him; that his words instead of hurting her had filled her with a wild pleasure that had almost overpowered her. A great lump came in her throat. She tried to choke it down. She looked at the hole in the stocking but she could not see it. She bent her head further down and further. The lump kept rising in her throat. Her eyes were swimming. Two great tears fell in her lap. She winked her eyes hard to keep them back, but they kept coming faster. She wondered how she could hide them. Some one caught her

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hand, and she felt an arm on her shoulder. She heard Newton's voice.

"Sibley," he cried, "Forgive me for hurting you so. I did not think what I was doing. I was thinking only of myself. You love him and I should not talk as I do."

He felt a shudder run over her.

"I ought not to hate him so," he continued, "But I can't help it. It all seems wrong to me and it makes me forget myself."

She pushed him away from her.

"Your wound! Your wound!" she cried anxiously. "Get back into your chair. I am afraid you will open it. Get back. Please do."

Newton held his place.

"Never mind that wound, now," Newton said. "I have one that hurts me more. Your tears made me forget this cut in my side and remember the one in my heart."

She put her head down in her hands.

"Forgive me, Sibley," he cried. "I am going away just as soon as I am strong enough to walk. To-morrow, perhaps, and I will never

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trouble you again. But I want you to say that you forgive me before I go."

"Yes; yes!" she cried. "Go away, now, now. No not now, but when you are strong. You will make me forget myself. I must not do that. No, I must not do that. Whatever happens I must not do that."

She was sobbing. Newton looked down at her helplessly. Her words were so incoherent that he scarcely understood them. But he knew she wanted him to go away. He felt a numbness all over him. The wind rose and seemed to be adding its wails to hers.

"I'll go to-morrow, Sibley," he said after a moment. "I could not stay another day. I am sorry to have hurt you as I have done. It ill repaid the kindnesses you have shown me. I forgot myself when I did it. Perhaps when you are married and the sound of childish voices calling you mother has softened your heart you will forgive me. I wish I could do something to repair the hurt. I will do what little I can by going away. I have been very happy

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here. These few months have been the happiest I have ever known. But I have found that happiness never lasts long. It always precedes a new sorrow."

Sibley sprang to her feet and rushed to her room. She did not even trust herself to look at him. Newton sat down again and gazed vacantly out of the window.

Chapter XVI

A RAINY Saturday. The water poured down in sheets. The wind dashed it against the windows as though it would hurl it through the panes. The drops roared on the roof and pounded on the doors. Newton was sitting by the kitchen window gazing disconsolately out across the fields. They seemed to be dancing before his eyes. The rain was slowly converting them into swamps. A be-draggled chicken perched moodily on the woodpile beneath a tree. Now and then it would gingerly rise up, give its feathers a timid flutter and settle down again.

Newton kept his eyes bent out over the fields. He was trying to master himself for an ordeal. He had promised to go away that day. He intended to keep his promise. The nearer the time came for him to announce his departure the harder he found it was going to be, even though he knew that Sibley wished it. He wondered why that did not make it easy. How

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dreary it looked outside and he must go out into it. To-morrow the sun might shine, but not for him. He would then be far beyond the influence of his sun, Sibley. He drummed on the window pane and watched the chicken.

Ridgeby was sitting by the kitchen window diligently figuring on the edges of old newspapers. A frayed blank book was open before him. He held the worn stub of a pencil in his stiff fingers and he bobbed his head with every rude figure he made, stopping every now and then to wet the lead on his tongue. There was a worried look on his face that deepened as he continued his calculations. At times his face would lighten for a moment and he would move the pencil rapidly, then it would darken again and he would put down the figures slowly, as though he dreaded to see the result. At times he would stop figuring for a moment and gaze gloomily at the wall. Then he would shake his head and sigh.

Sibley was sitting near him with a book in her hand. She pretended to be reading, but

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for half an hour she had not turned a page. There was a tense expression on her face and a suspicious redness about her eyes that suggested weeping. She watched her father closely. She seemed distressed, as though some load that he was carrying was resting heavily upon her shoulders as well. Now and then she would glance over to where Newton was looking out the window. Then the expression on her face would change to one of beseeching. She would catch her breath and look back at Ridgeby.

Her mother was sitting in the low rocking chair by the stove mending a pair of overalls. She would at times glance with a worried expression at Ridgeby. Reuben had spread a red handkerchief over his bald pate and gone to sleep. He was giving utterance to low snores to which no one paid any attention. Lilt was out in the barn washing a harness.

"Six un six's twelve, carry one. Six un six's twelve an' one's thirteen, carry one. Three un two's five an' one's six," muttered Ridgeby. Then he sighed and shook his head.

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"I can't make it no way, Em'ly," he said gloomily without looking up. "I don't see no way out."

His wife sighed.

"Well, don't worry none, Hiram," she said. "Th' Lord's tuk care of us fer quite a spell an' I don't b'lieve He's goin' back on us jes' yet. We've seen some pretty dark places 'fore now, Hiram, but He allus tuk us through somehow, an' I calc'late th' Lord'll provide this time. We done th' bes' we cud an' ef it's His will t' bring trouble on us we hadn't ought t' complain none."

Ridgeby shook his head dubiously.

"We haint never had a man like ole George Hawkins t' deal with 'fore this. He'd give his eyes fer this farm an' I guess he's goin' t' get it."

His voice was hopeless. The intense look on Sibley's face deepened. She looked toward the floor.

"Won't he give us a little more time, Hiram?" asked his wife. "Seems like he orter."

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“Don't believe we'd better hope fer nahthin' like that,” Ridgeby sighed. “'Tain't Hawkins' way t' be easy with people. It's our only chance, though. I've figgered every way.”

He turned to the table and went to work again.

“Seven fr'm ten's three. Four fr'm nine's five——”

Newton turned suddenly around from the window.

“I have one more favour to ask of you, Ridgeby,” he said quietly. “It will be the last, I hope.”

“Two t'ms six's twelve. Two t'ms one's two an' one's three. Two t'ms five——Huh! What's that?”

“I said that I had a last favour to ask of you,” Newton repeated.

The pucker came out of the old man's forehead. His rugged face cleared in a smile.

“Oh, favour. Course. Fire away.”

“I must leave here this afternoon and wish to ask Lilt to drive me down to the village. It

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is raining so hard that I am afraid to risk the walk, besides, I am scarcely strong enough for it."

Newton said the words calmly. In fact, his tone was one of unconcern, but there was a tumult in his heart which he feared would break out.

There was a dead silence. Ridgeby's pencil stopped poised in the air. His wife looked up from her mending in astonishment. Reuben pulled the handkerchief from his head and gaped at him. Sibley's cheeks turned a shade paler and she kept looking toward the floor.

"May he drive me down?" Newton asked.

Ridgeby partially recovered himself.

"Why, what d' yeh mean?"

"What I said," Newton returned. "I am going to quit, throw up my job, going away."

"Goin' away?" Ridgeby gasped. "Why, what's got int' yeh?"

Newton looked out the window again.

"Something has arisen that takes me away," he said slowly, "And that this afternoon. I

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should have gone this morning but I was in hopes that the rain would stop. It hasn't, so I must go as it is."

"Well, I swan!" exclaimed Ridgeby. "Where yeh goin'?"

"The same place I came from."

"The same place yeh came from, where's that?" asked Mrs. Ridgeby, who had just recovered her breath.

"Nowhere."

Newton spoke dolefully. He stole a glance at Sibley. She was still gazing toward the floor.

"Ef yeh'd take my *advice*," croaked Reuben, "Yeh'd go t' th' 'sylum. There mus' be somepin wrong in yer upper story an' I know it. I've been suspicious 'at yeh 'uz crazy ever since yeh come. There don't no sane man act th' way you do."

Newton smiled gloomily.

"Sane or not," he said, "I am going away."

"When 're yeh comin' back?" Ridgeby asked, puzzled.

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"Never."

Again Newton looked at Sibley. She had not taken her eyes from the floor.

"Now I want t' know what this means," Ridgeby said, decidedly. "Here all of a sudden, like a clap o' thunder, 'thout givin' nobody no warnin' yeh hop up here an' tell us yeh're goin' away. Ef that haint th' queerest doin's I ever see."

"An' you jes' out o' bed," buzzed his wife.

"Better take my *advice* an' go t' th' 'sylum," Reuben wheezed.

Sibley still looked at the floor. Newton gazed out the window.

"Yeh'll ketch yer death in th' rain," said Mrs. Ridgeby.

"What's th' matter?" Ridgeby asked.

"Nothing."

"You are the queerest feller I ever see," the old man exclaimed in exasperation. "An' th' queerest feller I ever expect t' see. Yeh're a whole bundle of mysteries."

"He ought t' go t' th' 'sylum," piped Reuben.

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“Yeh’re jes’ like th’ ghost in the story book. Nobody knows where yeh come from, yeh don’t say nahthin’ ’bout who yeh are ner who yer folks be, ner nahthin’, work here fer a while, get hurt, then ’fore yer half well get up an’ say yeh’re goin’ away, an’ when we ask yeh where yeh’re goin’ yeh say nowhere.”

“The work for the autumn is just about over,” Newton replied. “So I can be of but very little help to you, not enough at any rate to pay for the trouble my further stay would cause, therefore I think it best for me to go. When I decide to do a thing I always do it at once, that is why I am going this afternoon. I already owe you a greater debt than I shall ever be able to repay and it is not right for me to make the debt larger.”

“Fiddlesticks!” exclaimed Ridgeby.

“’Sylum,” wheezed Reuben.

“My lan’,” said Mrs. Ridgeby.

Sibley sighed.

“So I want you to allow Lilt to take me down to the village.”

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Ridgeby turned back to the table.

"Yeh don't go a step out o' this house t' night," he said firmly.

"Not a step," repeated his wife.

"'Cept 'tis t' th' 'sylum," Reuben cackled.

"When yeh're decently well course yeh can go ef yeh want, but till then yeh stay right here."

"Well, I see that you do not know me," Newton said, getting up. "I am going this afternoon even if I have to walk."

Ridgeby got up from his chair. Newton had never seen him look so before. The gentle expression that usually sat upon his features gave place to one of intense firmness. A pucker came in his forehead. His lips were pressed tightly together.

"Sit down there," he thundered. "I told yeh that yeh didn't go out o' this house t'night an' when I say a thing I mean it. I don't care what's th' matter ner nahthin'. Yeh're goin t' stay here till yeh get sommers near well ef we have t' tie yeh down in bed t' hold yeh. I hain't

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goin' t' be responsible fer yeh're murder an' that's jes' what it means t' let yeh go out o' th' house fer two weeks yet. So yeh might uz well make yeh're mind up t' that right now."

He looked around the room. His eyes fell upon Sibley. He looked from her to Newton. Both seemed confused.

"Sibley," he asked sharply, "What's this mean? What hev yeh been doin' t' Newton. There's somepin wrong here an' I want t' know what it is. This 's my house an' I intend t' know what's goin' on inside it."

The old man gave a start. He straightened up. The twists that years of toil had tied in his back suddenly went out. He stopped stock still. His eyebrows drew down. His breath came heavily. An expression fairly fierce came over his face. An awful suspicion had flashed into his mind. It was fanned into a flame and blazed forth and overpowered him.

"Tell me what this means," he cried, striding towards Newton. "I'm suspicious somepin's wrong here an' it makes me afraid. Tell

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me what it is 'fore I ferget myself. Tell me what it is or by th' Eternal I'll forget your condition an' make mince meat of yeh. What hev yeh been doin' t' my girl?"

His voice grew in strength and ended almost in a shriek. Sibley was trembling. She looked at her father in a helpless fashion. Her heart was in her mouth. Every particle of strength seemed to have left her. Newton was taken so completely by surprise that he did not know how to answer.

"What hev yeh been doin' t' my girl?" Ridgeby thundered again.

"Nothing," stammered Newton.

"Nahthin'! Nahthin'!" shouted Ridgeby striding excitedly up and down the room. "That's all I've hearn sence I met yeh, nahthin' an' nowhere. I might a known yeh want right fr'm th' way yeh acted. Yeh always acted uz though yeh had done somepin yeh wuz ashamed of. Tell me what yeh've been a doin' t' my girl."

Thoughts flew fast through Newton's brain.

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

He thought of no explanation which he could offer except to tell the truth and that did not seem right towards Sibley. He looked over at her. She was still looking at the floor.

Ridgeby was beside himself. Newton's silence caused the suspicion in his mind to flash until it maddened him. He did not know what he was doing. The room was whirling. He thought he saw Newton cringing before him. He raised his fist and struck wildly out. There was a mad whirring in his head, then the mist cleared from his brain. He gazed vacantly at the floor. Newton was lying there still with his eyes shut. Sibley was on her knees by his side stroking his forehead and calling to him. He saw her white and frightened face. He sank back into a chair.

"Hiram Ridgeby, what hev yeh done?" his wife cried, springing up.

"Ef yeh'd take my *advice*," whimpered Reuben.

Lilt opened the door and halted on the threshold.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

“Why, what——” he stammered.

“Help me, Lilt,” Sibley cried, from the floor.

“Why, what——” he stammered again.

“Never mind what,” Sibley cried. “Help me get Newton up on the bed. I’m afraid he’s killed. Mother, get water. Out of the way, Reuben.”

Lilt picked Newton up and carrying him into his room laid him on the bed. Blood was dyeing his clothing. His wound had opened again.

Chapter XVII

SIBLEY made herself mistress of the house. All the latent forces of her nature suddenly manifested themselves and the others, overborne by her spirit, gave the reins into her hands and did her bidding. Ridgeby walked about the kitchen in a state of bewilderment. He scarcely comprehended what had happened. He tried to study it out.

When Newton came somewhat to himself Sibley shut every one else out of the room and sitting down by the side of the bed began to stroke his forehead. He partly regained consciousness, looked at her vacantly, then sank into a half stupor. The physician for whom Lilt had been sent arrived at last. Ridgeby did not take his eyes from the closed door of Newton's room from the time the doctor entered it until he came out. Ridgeby followed him into the yard.

“Is he hurt?” he asked.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

"The cut in his side has opened again. How did he fall?"

"Oh, he fell, did he?"

"Why yes. That's what your daughter says."

Ridgeby stood nodding his head.

"He fell. Is he going t' die?" The voice was mechanical.

"I think not. He will be a long time getting well but unless something unexpected happens he ought to pull through."

"I haint killed him then?" Ridgeby's voice was still mechanical as though he did not comprehend what he was saying. The doctor stared at him.

"What?"

"I say I haint killed him then?"

"Killed him. What do you mean?" the doctor exclaimed. "I thought he fell."

"Oh yes. He fell. He fell. Oh yes."

Ridgeby turned and walked back to the house. The doctor shook his head and drove down the lane. When Ridgeby got back into the kitchen he sat down in a chair and gazed

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

vacantly at Newton's door until nine o'clock, then he got up and went to bed. Lilt slept that night on a blanket by the door. Sibley found him there when she opened the door in the morning. Her eyes were red and dry. There was a hectic flush on her cheeks.

"Have you been there all night, Lilt?" she asked.

"Yes'm," Lilt answered. "I thought perhaps yeh might want somepin and ther ought t' be somebody handy, so I thought I'd jes' slump down front o' th' door. How is 'e?"

"He did not come out of the stupor during the night." Sibley's lip trembled. "I am afraid he is going to die. The doctor wouldn't promise much. What did he tell father?"

"Dunno. Ridgeby went out in th' yard with him. We couldn't get nahthin' out o' him when he come back. He jes' sot an' stared at th' door like he wuz tryin' t' look a hole through it. He seemed kind o' vacant like. What's th' matter with 'im anyway?"

Sibley turned her head away.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

"I don't know," she answered.

"What 'uz th' trouble, anyhow, Miss Sibley?" Lilt asked after a pause. "Seems like somepin must be wrong. How'd Newton get hurt?"

"He fell," Sibley answered laconically.

Lilt pulled at his hair and shook his head.

"Say Miss Sibley," he said after a moment, "Yeh go t' bed an' get some sleep an' lemme watch him jes' 's soon uz I milk. Yeh're nigh beat out an' 'll be dyin', too, 'fore long. I declare ef taint most worth bein' sick for t' have you take care of a feller."

Sibley smiled the wanest kind of a smile.

"I couldn't sleep, Lilt," she answered.

He looked at her narrowly. Then he scratched his head.

"This here's th' most mixed up mess I ever see. I can't make head ner tail out of it. I hope things get straightened out someway, but they're mightily snarled jes' now. But yeh'll go t' sleep after I milk, now won't yeh. Yeh'll let me do that much fer yeh?"

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

“Well I’ll try it, Lilt,” Sibley answered. Then she paused a moment. Twice she started to speak, then checked herself. Then she spoke suddenly. “There is one thing that you can do for me, Lilt, something that you must do and make sure of. That is to stop Reuben’s tongue. Fix him some way so that he will never open his mouth concerning what happened last night. The truth is, Lilt, that things are as you say, terribly mixed”—Sibley sighed and looked toward the floor—“Something came up which made it seem best to both Newton and me that he should go away. He for one reason—and I—for another. Father was very much worried about matters yesterday and was not himself at all. Newton’s announcement of his departure angered him. This, coupled with Newton’s reticence concerning himself ever since he has been here made father suspicious that something was wrong and he suddenly became almost insane. Newton did not fall. I lied about that. Father struck him a terrible blow full in the face and knocked him down. I am afraid he has killed him.”

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

Sibley spoke rapidly, almost incoherently. A shadow swept over Lilt's face. He clenched his fists.

"Ther haint nahthin' wrong be there," he asked savagely. "Ef I thought there was I'd strike him again."

Sibley caught at his arm.

"Nothing, Lilt. It was only a suspicion that flashed in father's mind without the slightest foundation."

Lilt's face cleared.

"Reuben must be kept still," continued Sibley. "He will have it all over the county inside of three days, and then there will be no stopping it, and you know how a story grows."

Lilt nodded his head.

"I'll do th' bes' I can, Miss Sibley. Reuben's got a tongue a mile long an' when it once gets t' cacklin' there's no stoppin' it. I'll go out an' do up th' chores an' get back uz soon uz I can." He caught up the milk pails and hurried out.

A moment later Ridgeby came down the stairs. Sibley was just disappearing into New-

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

ton's room. He called to her. She looked back. He held out his arms and called again. She glanced at Newton, then went up to her father. He caught her in his arms and drew her head down on his shoulder. Tears came into the old man's eyes and his voice was so choked he could scarcely speak.

"Somepin's wrong Sibley, somepin's wrong," he cried. "I can't see someway jes' where 'tis but I know things aint right. I haint myself someway. I didn't know what I's doin' las' night. I got an idea in my head he'd wronged yeh, Sibley, an' it made me crazy. 'Taint so is it? 'Taint so?"

Sibley was weeping. He pressed his rough, work-cracked hands on her head.

"Tell me 'taint so, Sibley."

She shook her head.

"How could you do it, father. How could you do it? I thought you had killed him. He may die yet. He had done nothing, father, nothing." She was almost hysterical.

The tears crept faster down Ridgeby's rugged cheeks.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

"I didn't know what I wuz doin'," he said hoarsely. "It seems like a dream now. Did I strike him? But he acted so strange. What 'uz it all about? Can't yeh tell yer old pa all about it. There's somepin wrong an' I want yeh t' tell me what 'tis."

Sibley with an effort regained control of herself.

"There is nothing wrong, father. I am all worn out and can't talk. Wait until I have rested and then perhaps we can straighten it out. But don't think there is anything wrong, for there is not."

Sibley broke away from her father with a kiss and went back to Newton. Ridgeby stumbled out to the barn. After breakfast Lilt took Sibley's place at Newton's side, but she only stayed away for two hours. By ten o'clock she was back again. An hour later Newton roused up, looked about him for a moment and then sank into a quiet sleep. Sibley gave a quick sigh of relief. She watched him for a moment then went out into the kitchen.

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

"The danger is passed," she said. "He will live."

All the morning Ridgeby had been walking nervously about the room. When he heard Sibley's whispered words he caught up his hat and went out.

A little after dinner Abner Hawkins came in. His coarse voice broke rudely into the stillness. It awoke Newton. He recognized the voice at once and obeying some sudden impulse he did not open his eyes. Sibley tip-toed to the door.

"Sh!" she whispered. "You will wake him."

"Wake who?" roared Abner.

"Newton Mills."

"Oh, that feller. Well wake and be damned I don't care. Come out here I want t' see yeh."

"Please keep still," she whispered.

"Come here," he called rudely.

She went up to him. He caught her roughly in his arms and kissed her. A shudder ran over her and she shrank away from him. Newton opened his eyes and feebly shook his fist at the wall.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

"Please keep still, Abner," Sibley pleaded, "He is much worse and may be dying."

"Seems t' me yeh're worryin' 'bout him a hull lot," Abner growled. "'Spose he do die. He haint nahthin' but a hired hand no-how."

Lilt bristled up. He put a big fist beneath Abner's nose.

"Say," he whispered savagely, "Let off any more o' that lip o' yourn an' I'll throw yeh out th' door."

Sibley was trembling from hand to foot. She gave Lilt a glance of gratitude. He saw it. He caught Abner by the arm.

"I haint nahthin' but a hired han' m'self but I'm a little better thun you are eny day in th' week, an' Newt Mills is worth th' two of us put together, three times over."

Abner shrank back. He was afraid of Lilt.

"I want thinkin' none 'bout you," he grumbled. "I 'uz talkin' 'bout tramps like Newt."

"D'yeh want t' go out th' door?" repeated Lilt. "Better keep mighty mum."

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

"Where's Ridgeby," Abner growled, sitting down awkwardly in a chair.

Ridgeby came in the door just that minute. Sibley escaped back to Newton. He continued to feign sleep.

"How'de Ridgeby," was Abner's greeting.

"Hello Abner. How's yer pa?"

"He's pret' well. There haint never nahthin' th' matter with th' ole man 'cept 'tis th' rooma-tiz. That bothers him a good deal."

"Begun t' thrash yet?"

"Davidson's comin' t'morrer. He jes' finished up at Thompson's, Friday. We'll keep him 'bout a week guess. Got th' thrashin' to do on th' Simpkins' place yeh know. When yeh goin' t' begin?"

"Herrick's comin' over week after nex', I don't like Davidson very well."

"Bout's good's anybody."

"Think so. Well I'm goin' t' change any how."

"Better stick t' Davidson, he's square."

"Yeh've got an intrust in Davidson's machine haint yeh?" Lilt asked slyly.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

Abner coloured.

"Got a little, jes' t' 'com'date Davidson though," he stammered. "Course don't make no diffrunce t' me who yeh have, only I'd see yeh got a square deal."

"Perhaps I had better have Davidson," said Ridgeby. "When cud he come over?"

"Seein' it's you I'll have him come over right after he finishes up fer us."

"Well send him 'long. I'll send a note over t' Herrick t'morrer tellin' him he needn't come."

"Goin' to come out all right on everything?" Abner asked after a pause.

Sibley in Newton's room raised her head and listened.

"Don't know," Ridgeby answered slowly. "Things don't look jes' uz bright uz they might. Grain's sellin' s' cheap this year don't hardly pay t' raise it."

"Pa uz sayin' yestiday he didn't see nahthin' in farmin' these days."

There was another pause. Abner broke it.

"Dad's bought 'at medder lan' o' Thomp-

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

son's. They've been dickerin' fer some time. Thompson 'uz holdin' it pretty high, but he come t' dad's terms. It's kinder crippled Pa, too."

Sibley sat very still almost holding her breath. There was another pause.

"Oh say, Ridgeby," Abner broke out suddenly, "Yeh know yeh're mor'gage is due on th' twenty-fifth, n' this is th' eighth. Dad wanted I shud ask yeh what yeh wuz goin' t' do 'bout it. He's kinder hard up an' needs a little money."

A look of pain swept over Sibley's face. She put her head down in her hands and gave herself up to listening.

"I don't know jes' yet what I'll be able t' do, Abner," Ridgeby answered slowly. "Things have been pretty hard with me lately."

"I'm mighty sorry, for Dad's got t' get some money sommers an' he 'uz in hopes yeh cud help him out."

"I did think I'd be able t' pay it all up. But seems like everything jes' come on me t' onct.

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It's made me pretty hard up. I'll try an' do somepin on it and make some 'rangements 'bout th' rest. Yeh tell yer Pa I'll do th' very bes' I can."

"Course Dad don't want t' push yeh none."

Sibley's face brightened.

"I didn't think he'd be hard on me under th' circumstances," Ridgeby answered. "I'll do th' bes' I can."

"Ord'narily Dad wouldn't said a word, but way 'tis now he's jes' got t' have a little money an' he don't see no other place t' get it."

Sibley's face darkened again.

"How much d' yeh guess he's got t' have?"

"Well he's pret' hard up, otherwise he wouldn't say nahthin'."

"How much d'yeh think he can get 'long with."

"He says he don't see how he's goin' t' get through 'thout th' hull on it. Course he don't want t' push yeh none."

Sibley's face blanched.

Ridgeby shook his head.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

“ Ther ain’t no way I can do it, Abner, no way possible.”

“ Course ef yeh can’t yeh can’t.”

“ It’s this way, Abner,” Ridgeby said slowly. “ Las’ spring Em’ly ’uz tuk bad with th’ rooma-tiz an’ there ’uz a big doctor’s bill. Then I want well fer a spell an’ had t’ hire a han’ t’ help out. Then we had the Simpkinses here and Mis’ Simpkins an’ th’ baby died an’ had t’ be buried an’ there ’uz more expense, then Newton got hurt. ’Tween the hull thing I’ve jes’ been et up.”

“ Yeh can’t expect us t’ suffer fer other people,” said Abner roughly. “ Yeh shudn’t be takin’ everybody in an’ doin’ fer ’em th’ way yeh do. Yeh owe somepin t’ yer creditors.”

“ Th’ burdens th’ Lord puts on me I’m bound t’ carry,” said Ridgeby, humbly. “ I’ve got t’ trust him not t’ make ’em too heavy.”

“ Well Dad don’t want to push yeh none, but he’s jes’ got t’ have some money. That’s all there is to it. ’Taint his fault ’at yeh harbour all th’ tramps in th’ county. He expects folks

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

he's com'dated t' pay him fore they go t' runnin' horspitals. He's got t' have money en' ef yeh can't raise it he'll have t' be harder on yeh thun he likes t' be."

Sibley's face became pale as death. She started to spring to her feet but sank down again. She bit her lips until the blood came.

"D'yeh mean he'll take th' farm," Ridgeby asked blankly.

"He's got t' have money."

"But he'll give me a little chance, won't he? He won't put me out of a home?"

"Don't see how he can help it less yeh pay up."

Ridgeby got up from his chair and tottered over and put his hand on Abner's shoulder. Abner looked down at the floor.

"Have a little mercy on me Abner," Ridgeby pleaded. "I give yeh th' dearest thing I had on earth, my Sibley, an' it almost bruk my heart t' do it. She said she wanted it that way so I didn't say nahthin'. Now don't turn her old Ma and Pa out in th' road t' die as yeh did

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

th' Simpkinses. Ef yeh'll only give me a little time I can pull through."

"'Tain't me," Abner replied stolidly. "It's Dad, an' he's jes' got t' have money."

Ridgeby brushed his hands across his eyes and turned away.

"Ef it's th' Lord's will I can't say nahthin'," he said hoarsely.

Sibley put her head down on the bed.

"Yeh don't need t' worry none," Abner said with an attempt at pacification. "I won't see yeh turned out of a home, Ridgeby. Yeh can stay here till me an' Sib's married, then Dad'll prob'bly give me this place. I'll see yeh don't suffer none. I wist m'self 'at Dad wouldn't be s' hard on yeh but he's in a bad way an' don't see no other way out of it. Tell Sib ef she's s' interested takin' care o' that tramp she can't see me, I'll stay way till he gets well."

Abner picked up his hat and lumbered toward the door. Ridgeby was staring gloomily at the wall. Lilt seemed about to spring on Abner. He held himself back.

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

"I'll tell Dad what yeh said 'bout th' mor'gage," Abner called back as he went out the door.

Sibley raised her head an instant then she threw it down on the bed again and burst into a paroxysm of weeping.

"And it was all in vain," she sobbed. "All in vain. All in vain."

She felt an arm stealing around her waist.

Chapter XVIII

SIBLEY continued to sob. The arm drew tighter about her. Then came Newton's voice. It was feeble, but it was intense and sympathetic.

“Sibley!”

A thrill ran over the girl. The pressure of his arm was like an electric current. The sound of his voice was soothing. It found its way into her heart. She was too much overcome by the shock she had experienced and its attendant grief to reason. She knew that Newton was awake, that his arm was about her, that his voice had whispered in her ear. Instinctively she tried to pull away. The arm closed tighter about her and the voice came again, low tender, pleading.

“Sibley!”

She looked up at him. Her tears were flowing so fast that she could not see him clearly. He was sitting bolt upright. His face was pale and drawn but there was an expression of dawning hope lighting it up.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

“Is this the reason you were going to marry Abner Hawkins?” he asked, looking deeply into her eyes.

She threw herself down on the bed again and hid her face while her tears broke out afresh. Newton began to stroke her forehead gently. He had forgotten the wound in his side. He bent closer to her.

“Tell me, Sibley,” he asked again. “Is this the reason you were going to marry Abner Hawkins?”

Sibley made a violent attempt to regain control of herself. Newton continued caressing her.

“Speak to me,” he pleaded softly. “Have I guessed rightly?”

Sibley could not look up. After a struggle she nodded her head.

“And you do not love him?” he asked with an accent of hope in his voice.

Sibley shook her head.

The arm drew tighter about her waist. Sibley ceased weeping. A restfulness came over her. Newton's caresses filled her with a new

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

sense of contentment. She knew she should resent them, should tear herself away from his arms, should be very angry with him for what he had done, but her grief had left her too weak to struggle. She was half glad it was so. She did not want to struggle.

Newton found himself almost afraid to ask another question for fear his dawning hope would set again. In his weakness he began to tremble. Sibley felt it. It affected her strangely.

“Is this the only reason you were going to marry him?” he asked slowly.

A shudder ran over the girl's form. Her muscles seemed suddenly to become rigid. She looked up. It was a strange face that Newton found looking into his. There was something pitifully tragic about it.

“Could there be any other reason?” she asked. “I loathe him. I despise him. I hate him.”

She melted again and bowed her face into her hands. Newton began stroking her forehead as before.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

"You hate him and yet you were going to marry him?" he asked slowly.

"Yes."

"To save the farm?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it."

He drew her closer to him and turned her face around so he could look into her eyes. She made a feeble effort to pull away from him.

"No, I will not let you go," he said. "At least not yet. Tell me all about this trouble."

A blush mantled Sibley's white cheeks. She sank back and ceased to struggle.

"I thought I could save the farm," she whispered. "I knew that father would be unable to meet the mortgage when it came due. He is so open hearted that he cares for everyone without a thought for himself. It was this mortgage that procured the money which sent me to college. It would have broken my heart to think that after they had sacrificed so much for me that they should lose everything on my account. I am afraid it would kill father and mother to lose the farm. It has been their

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

home for nearly fifty years. It would be like parting with life for them to go away from it. George Hawkins held the mortgage and he has said that he would own this farm before he died. I knew that he would have no mercy on father. Abner Hawkins has always forced his attentions on me since we went to the district school together. I always disliked him, he was so rough, so savage, so cruel. The older I grew the more I disliked him until I came to abhor the sight of him. He has repeatedly asked me to marry him. The thought was enough to chill me. But when I saw how he had father in his power I gave up, gritted my teeth and with my heart filled with loathing promised to marry him. I thought that this way I could help my father and mother. It was but a small repayment for all they have done for me. I did not think that Abner would see the parents of his promised wife turned into the road. Merciless as I knew him and his father to be I could not think them that bad. But I was mistaken. My life has been thrown away

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

and it has done no good. Poor father and mother."

Sibley sighed heavily. Newton looked at her seriously.

"Did you know what it meant to marry that man?" he asked.

"Yes," Sibley whispered, "I knew it all."

"Think of the picture," Newton said. "These pretty hands, so soft and white, what would they be after you had been his wife for a time. Think of them worn, rough, and misshapen, with the knuckles swollen and knotted. Think of those blue eyes faded with weeping. You have but to look at his mother to see the picture. Think of you yoked to that animal. You would be the slave of a tyrant, your drudgery repaid by rough words and perhaps blows. Your life would be one unceasing nightmare. Have you thought of all this?"

"Thought of it," Sibley returned slowly, "Yes, I have thought of it all and of a thousand horrors more compared to which these are nothing. I have been haunted by them night

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

and day until for a time it seemed that I must die to escape them. Every time that he comes near me I feel as though I could kill him. I have buried it all. It was wicked of me to think as I did. I was doing but little when mother and father had done so much. I have kept all my feelings hid and have made them think me happy. It was a terrible struggle at times. It seemed as though my feelings must get the better of me."

Newton looked at her tenderly.

"How could you make such a sacrifice?" he asked.

An ecstatic smile broke over Sibley's face. Newton had never seen her look more beautiful.

"How could I make such a sacrifice?" she asked, looking up at him. "How could I refuse to make it? I should have hated myself had I not done as I did. The tortures my conscience would have poured upon me would have been harder to bear than the worst the sacrifice can do. Think of all they have denied themselves for me. If they lose the farm they have

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

given up everything. Think of what I owe them. You would not have me ungrateful?"

"But don't you know," replied Newton earnestly, "That the knowledge of this sacrifice would grieve your parents ten times more than would the loss of their home?"

"They will never know," Sibley returned simply.

Newton smiled down upon her.

"Poor little heroine," he said caressing her, "And it has all been in vain. Your plan to save them has failed."

Tears sprang to Sibley's eyes again.

"Yes, it has failed."

"What are you going to do now?"

He looked closely into her eyes. They fell before his gaze. Sibley gave a start. She looked full up at him and made an effort to spring away.

"What am I doing," she exclaimed, anxiously, struggling to get away. "What a selfish girl I am. In thinking of my own cares I have forgotten all about you. You will kill

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

yourself this way. The physician said you must keep perfectly still. I thought you were dying last night. You must lie down."

Newton held her. He smiled and shook his head.

"I am a long way from dying now," he said earnestly. "A little while ago I did not care whether I died or not. But now I want to live and I am going to live, and I want you to help me live."

A blush suffused Sibley's face and she lay still again.

"You know that I love you, Sibley," Newton continued, "I have shown it in every motion. I have tried very hard to hide it but I could not hide my love without hiding myself. My love had become me. I believe I began to love you before I saw you. The day that I came, as we drove into the yard I heard you singing 'Bon Ami,' an old favourite of mine. I turned and caught a glimpse of you. Then it was I fear that I began to love you. I tried hard not to do so especially when I learned

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

that you were to marry Abner Hawkins. I could never reconcile myself to that idea. I could not understand how you could care for him, yet you seemed happy. I tried to make myself think it was nothing to me, but I soon saw that it was everything. It has seemed to me at times that I could kill the man. I did handle him pretty roughly the night we wrestled. I was well paid for it, too."

"I thought you were killed," Sibley shuddered.

"When you told me you wanted me to go away the wish came to me that I had been." He stopped for a minute and looked down at her.

"Why did you want me to go away?" he asked suddenly.

A vivid blush swept over Sibley's cheeks. She turned her face away.

"Why did you want me to go away?" he asked again. "Did my loving you so displease you that you did not even want me near you? It was torture to me but it was a torture I could

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

not bring myself to leave. Why did you want me to go away?"

She hid her blushing face. She was still for a moment.

"Because," she whispered desperately, not trusting herself to look up at him, "Because I feared that if you stayed my heart would fail me and I could never marry Abner Hawkins."

She sprang away from him.

"There, you have made me confess it," she exclaimed. "Don't torture me any more."

"Sibley, Sibley," he called, holding his arms out toward her. "Come to me. Do not go away. I want you. I want you forever. You shall not go away from me. Come."

Sibley caught her breath.

"No, Newton," she cried faintly. "Don't tempt me. It is hard enough to bear as it is. I have promised myself to him."

"What!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean to say that you still intend to marry that fiend. The reason for the sacrifice is gone."

"Yes," she returned sadly. "I have given

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him my promise, what right have I to take it back? Besides I may yet be able to help father and mother. Abner has promised that they shall stay on the place until we are married and then he will see that they are taken care of. My duty is to them first even if I cared nothing for my promise. You should help me to bear it rather than tempting me away from it."

"What do you suppose Abner's promise to care for them is worth?" Newton replied. "When he finds himself in possession here do you suppose he will scruple to turn them out to die or go to the poorhouse? Even if he kept them here the humiliations he would subject them to would kill them."

"It is the only hope," Sibley replied slowly. "I must at least do my part. It is the only thing that can be done to save them."

"No, it is not the only hope," he said smiling wanly. "Come here a moment."

Sibley went up to him and sat down on the edge of the bed. He tried to put his arms around her again, but she shook her head.

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"Don't worry another moment about your father and mother, Sibley," he said. "That is a load you can take off your heart entirely. Your parents are not going to the poorhouse, they are not coming to want. They are not even going to lose the farm. I am not all ingratitude. Do you suppose that after I heard of their trouble that I intended to take no hand in the matter. They have showered kindnesses on me. It is but a little thing for me to do to aid them now. I will pay the mortgage."

"You pay the mortgage," Sibley exclaimed.

"Yes, why shouldn't I?"

There was a look of puzzled astonishment on Sibley's face. Newton saw it and understood it. He burst out into a feeble laugh.

"I forgot that I was only a tramp that Ridgeby picked up in the road. I was a tramp, but not one of the vicious variety."

He laughed again. Lilt heard the sound and opened the door.

"Hullo!" he called heartily. "Come to, hev yeh?"

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Ridgeby's careworn face appeared behind Lilt. It brightened as he looked in. An expression of relief came over it.

"Kin I come in?" he asked.

Newton held out his hand. Ridgeby shuffled up to the bed and bent over it.

"I don't see how I ever come t' do it," he began. "I hope yeh'll try t' forgive me?"

"Don't talk about that now," Newton returned. "You are in trouble. I was awake when Abner was here and heard all about it."

The careworn look deepened on Ridgeby's face. He sighed.

"I don't see no way out 'cept t' lose th' farm. It's been home t' us s' long that it'll be like dyin' t' go 'way from it. I don't see what we'll do nuther. Guess th' Lord 'll look after us some way. Em'ly an' me's lived here ever sence we 'uz married. All our children 'uz born an' died here 'an' it 'uz here we got little Sibley." His voice choked.

"Things are not so bad as they might be," Newton returned quietly. "I am fortunately

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in a position where I can be of some little assistance to you and in that way repay to a slight extent the unnumbered kindnesses you have all done me."

Ridgeby looked at him in amazement.

"If I had known about this it could have been fixed before," Newton continued. "I have a friend who has a little money that he wants to invest in Iowa farm mortgages. He asked me to look up one or two for him. I will write to him at once and we can have the money here by the time the other mortgage comes due. He will want it a long time loan at five per cent."

Lilt threw his arms into the air with a shout. Mrs. Ridgeby hastened in.

Ridgeby stood looking vacantly at Newton as though unable to comprehend his words. Then the strength seemed to leave his limbs. He sank to his knees and buried his face in the bed. Sobs and a prayer came mingled from his lips.

Newton's artificial strength suddenly ebbed away. His face became pale as death and he

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sank back on the pillows with his eyes closed. A look of pain swept over his face. Sibley was at his side in a moment. She hurriedly motioned the others out of the room. Ridgeby stumbled across the threshold. He would have fallen had not Lilt caught him. There were tears in Mrs. Ridgeby's eyes.

"Th' Lord's mighty good t' us, Hiram," she whispered. "I knew he want goin' t' desert us."

Newton opened his eyes after a moment. He tried to lift his arms up to Sibley, but he was too weak.

"Promise me," he whispered.

"I will think," she answered.

"Kiss me."

Sibley stooped and touched his lips with hers.

Chapter XIX

MRS. RIDGEBY sat out by the kitchen door quartering apples. A breeze from the north, courtly harbinger of Old Boreas, gently fanned her gray hairs about her temples and trailed them over her forehead in a white wreath. She worked mechanically, paring, coring and quartering the green globes with a deft skill that left her eyes free to wander in at the door where they fell upon the five straight-backed chairs shoved closely up by the table, those five chairs that had been vacated one by one years before had never known another occupant. To Mrs. Ridgeby's eyes the chairs were not empty and the glances she threw upon them were laden with caresses. Her fancy had escaped from the thrall of present reality and, yielding to the charm of a dreamy October day, had been wafted into the shadowy realm of reminiscence. The low rattle of the dead leaves in the trees became the chatter of young voices. The exultant pipings of a

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black bird overhead was tuned to the sweeter music of childish laughter. The varied clatter of the barn yard was transformed to the mirthful cries of children at play. Now and then a half smile would play about the corners of her mouth, or, again, an expression of pain would sweep over her features.

Sibley was sitting near her. She had been paring apples as well, but the pan now lay half emptied and unnoticed in her lap. One of her hands still held a knife but she did not feel its touch. The other supported her chin. She was looking away off across the fields to where a cloud had thrown a great shadow across a meadow. She watched the shadow as it crept slowly along eating up the sunshine. It was coming rapidly toward her. It fell upon her. She half shuddered, then turned to watch the bright glare that was following it up. The shadow passed and the sunlight broke out even brighter than before. Sibley sighed wearily and half started to take up her work again, but the absent expression settled upon her face once

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more and she forgot it. At length she got up, laid the pan of apples upon the steps, and went into the house.

A week had passed since bending low over the bed Sibley sealed her love for Newton with a kiss. The week had been one of varied emotions to each of them. To Newton it had been a time of quiet happiness alternated by seasons of eager discontent. A time of happiness because Sibley had said she loved him; of discontent because while she wavered in her determination to remain true to a self sacrificing promise, she still refused to break it. To Sibley the week had been a period of unceasing battle, of battle between her heart and her conscience. Her conscience urged her to marry Abner Hawkins because she had given him her sacred promise. Her heart cried out to her to break out into the full sunshine of this new love that had come upon her. She trembled between these two adversaries.

Newton was lying on his back gazing up at the ceiling. He was trying to resolve the laby-

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rinth of cracks in the plastering into faces. He heard Sibley's step as she entered the house. He called her.

"Do you want anything?" she asked looking in at the door.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"You."

Sibley's eyes dropped. Then she looked up, smiled, half started to go up to him, then turned away and disappeared into her room.

Mrs. Ridgeby cored and quartered, quartered and cored. The black bird gradually widened its circles, then flew off on a tangent and disappeared. With him went the fancy of childish voices his pipings had conjured up in Mrs. Ridgeby's mind. She came out from her revery and brushed the back of her hand across her eyes. She sighed heavily. Ridgeby came up from the barn and sat down upon the steps by her side. The lines in his face had deepened. He looked disconsolate.

"What's th' matter, Hiram?" his wife asked

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anxiously. "I hain't seen yeh lookin' so bad in a long time. Yeh ain't goin' t' be sick are yeh? Yeh've been workin' t' hard."

He shook his head.

"I can't work t'day somehow. I tried but I had t' give it up. My min' won't stay on work."

He looked up at the black bird, that had returned, bringing its mate with it. Then he silently gazed up into the face of his wife for some time.

"Em'ly," he said, slowly, after awhile. "D'ye know what day this is?"

Mrs. Ridgeby looked at him reproachfully.

"Hain't I been a mother," she answered. "Could I forget?"

"It's jest twenty-five years ago t'day he went away."

"Yes, twenty-five years ago t'day."

"You an' me's gettin' pretty old, Em'ly."

"We'll soon be younger now, Hiram."

"Yes, I know it."

Silence again for a few moments.

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"Seems like I couldn't kerry this load much longer, Em'ly." Ridgeby said at length.

"Yeh don't have t' kerry it all alone, Hiram."

"Seems like I do. I don't deserve no help I s'pose in kerryin' this. A minnet's anger has made me a quarter of a cent'ry o' torture. How I made yer heart ache, too, Em'ly. You was his mother an' I sent him away."

"Yeh thought yer's doin' right, Hiram. It seemed hard t' me but you was his father and knowed best."

"It wa'n't right, Em'ly. It wa'n't right. Th' Lord sent our Jim t' us an' made us responsible fer his soul. I forgot it fer th' moment. I only thought o' th' disgrace he'd brung on us. I shud have fergive th' disgrace, Em'ly."

"Yeh did fergive it, Hiram. Yeh fergive it almost before he was gone."

"But he never knew it, Em'ly, he never knew it."

"God knows it, Hiram."

"I don't know whether He does er not."

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Ridgeby's face was hopelessness itself.

"Seems like ef God knew how I've fergive Jim, he'd fergive me."

"Perhaps He has fergive yeh, Hiram."

"Don't seem like he could a, Emily. If he had fergive me like I fergive Jim He'd stop punishin' me, but He hain't, Em'ly. He hain't. It seems like my heart 'uz a bein' et out all th' time. Many's th' night when yeh thought me sleepin' I've been out on my knees prayin' fer fergiveness, but there never come no sign."

Tears began dropping from Mrs. Ridgeby's eyes. They glistened on the apples like dew drops.

"We've both suffered, Hiram," she whispered. "We've both suffered. If little Sibley hadn't come t' us I'm 'fraid my heart would a broke. Someway she reminded me o' Jim. It seemed sometimes like I'd got my Jim back a baby agin. Th' others wuz tuk so quick I b'lieve I'd a died ef Sibley hadn't come."

"It 'uz God's curse on me, Em'ly. It uz God's curse on me. I sent away one he give us an' t' punish me he tuk 'em all."

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There was silence again for some time.

"I wonder ef He tuk our Jim when I sent him away?" Ridgeby sighed after a while.

"He must a, Hiram," Mrs. Ridgeby answered tearfully. "He must a, Jim 'ud a come back ef He hadn't. Jim knew 'at we loved him. He knew 'at yeh'd fergive him an' take him back. Jim wa'n't a bad boy, only thoughtless. I know he'd a come back ef he was alive. I've felt fer a long time' at he was with th' rest."

"It must be, it must be," Ridgeby sighed. "I'd a found him 'fore this ef it wa'n't so. I never stopped huntin' fer him, Em'ly. I never said nahthin' 'bout it fer I never thought some-way it 'ud do no good, but I did everything I could t' find him an' bring him back t' yeh. But fer all I cud do I never found no trace. Twice they thought they'd found him, but each time it 'uz th' wrong one an' my heart 'uz torn with disappointments."

"Sometime we'll know, Hiram," his wife said slowly. "Sometime, we'll know."

"When 'at time comes I'll know I've been fergiven," Ridgeby answered with a sigh.

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The black bird carolled overhead. The wind rose higher and shook down the leaves from the trees and set them in a dance upon the ground. The clatter of the barn yard became quieter. Ridgeby sat and gazed gloomily away across the barren fields. At last his wife laid aside her pan and stooping wound her arms about his neck. She drew his gray head into her lap and kissed his forehead. He looked up at her. The clouds slowly passed away from his face. The lovelight of the honeymoon shone undimmed in his eyes.

A moment later old Reuben's uncouth form tumbled around the corner of the house. There was a comical look of protest on his face. He hobbled past the kitchen door and headed for the barn.

"Ef yeh'll take my *advice* yeh'll run," he piped. "She'll jaw yeh. Oh, I know what she's comin' fer. She's comin' t' jaw yeh."

"What's th' matter?" Ridgeby asked, starting to his feet.

"She's comin'," jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "I'm goin' t' th' barn. Ef yeh'll

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take my *advice* yeh'll go t'. She'll jaw yeh good ef she catches yeh. By Gum, she'll jaw yeh good."

Ridgeby turned and saw Miss Latey's slight form coming slowly up the lane. She walked feebly and stopped at frequent intervals as though to rest. She turned in at the gate and came around the house.

"Why, how d' yeh do?" Mrs. Ridgeby cried springing to her feet. She tried to keep the note of surprise out of her voice. "Come right int' th' kitchen. I'm glad t' see yeh. Yeh mus' take off yehr shawl an' stay t' tea. Yeh hain't been here in a long time."

Miss Latey sat down in the chair offered her. She was breathing heavily as though the exertion of walking had fatigued her greatly.

"No, guess I never was here afore—an' guess I'll never come again."

Her breath failed her. She had tried to sit upright in the little rocker but had weariedly sunk back into it. Her face was pale and worn. A hectic flush burned on her cheeks. She stifled a cough in her handkerchief. The prim-

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ness had gone out of her bearing. Her eyes had lost their snap.

"Yeh don't look uz well 's common," Mrs. Ridgeby said, sympathetically.

"I hain't, seems like th' life's about gone out o' me. I don't think I'll last much longer."

"Well, we're all gettin' on. I 'uz jest tellin' Hiram 'at we'd be young agin fer good 'fore long. Better take off yer shawl an' stay t' tea, we'd be real pleased t' have yeh."

"I can't stay but a minnit. I come up on—on—business."

Ridgeby turned out the door.

"Guess yeh wimmin folks 'll have t' excuse me. I'll get out o' th' way."

Miss Latey was coughing. She feebly motioned for him to stay.

"I've got somepin t' say t' yeh, t' both o' yeh," she stammered, turning her eyes toward the floor. Ridgeby turned back.

Miss Latey stifled her cough and pressed her hand over her heart as though to ease a pain there.

"It's hard for me to tell yeh what I've got

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t’,” she said clutching nervously at her dress. But I’m failin’ fast an’ know I hain’t very long t’ live, an’ someway I don’t feel like dyin’ with it on my soul. I know I’ve led a mean life but I’ve suffered th’ most fer it myself. There want no sun shinin’ fer me an’ I wanted t’ stop it shinin’ fer everybody else. I hope th’ Lord ’ll fergive me fer it.”

“ Yeh kept yer self away fr’m everybody t’ much,” Mrs. Ridgeby said sympathetically. “ Yeh’r allus welcome here. I’ve often wondered why yeh never come. I ’uz afraid perhaps we’d done somepin’ t’ yeh. Why didn’t yeh come? ”

“ I didn’t go no place. I was here once. Yeh didn’t see me. I didn’t mean yeh shud. That’s why I’m here now. It’s about yer boy—Yer boy Jim.”

“ Our Jim? ”

Ridgeby tottered to his feet. An expression of mingled pain and joy swept over his face.

“ Our Jim? Where is he? Do you know? Is he dead? Or what? ”

Miss Latey was seized with a paroxysm of

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coughing that left her speechless. Mrs. Ridgeby looked at her helplessly.

"Yes yer Jim," Miss Latey gasped when she caught her breath. "I don't expect yeh t' forgive me. That 'ud be askin' t' much, but I've got t' tell yeh anyway."

Ridgeby stood still looking at her. His jaws were set and his teeth clenched. His voice was husky.

"Fer God's sake tell us what yeh know," he cried. "Oh Jim. Our Jim."

"We all know how he disgraced yeh an' how he went away," she answered, her voice trembling. "But there don't nobody but me know how he come back."

"How he come back?"

"Yes, he did come back. Twenty years ago this winter."

"An' yeh never told us. My God! My God! Air yeh human?"

Miss Latey coughed again.

"I don't know," she answered faintly. "Yeh won't think so. I don't know what made

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me act th' way I did. Somepin made me do it. I know now how awful wicked it was. I want t' make it uz near right now uz I can. That's all I can do now."

She clutched at her dress again.

"It uz an awful night 'at he come back, twenty years ago. It 'uz th' night o' th' blizzard, when Tom Johnson froze t' death, perhaps yeh remember it. It 'uz about nine o'clock when I heard a feeble knock at th' door. First it frightened me. Then it come again. I went an' undid th' lock an' opened th' door. A man stumbled in an' fell on th' floor. He had a bundle in his arms. I got him up on the bed somehow. I don't know how. He was nearly dead. Froze, I cud see that. He looked awful, like he'd been sick. He wuz thin an' worn with his face all covered with a thick beard. After awhile he opened his eyes. Then I knew him. It 'uz Jim, your Jim. It wasn't Tom Johnson they thought froze t' death. It 'uz yer Jim. He wuz tryin' t' get back home. I done all I cud for him but he died 'fore mornin'."

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"An yeh never told us," Ridgeby moaned, "Yeh never told us." His wife was weeping silently.

Miss Latey coughed again.

"Yes, he wuz a comin' home. He said he knowed yeh'd fergive him an' take him back. He said he knowed yeh loved him fer all he'd done, an' he wuz a comin' home t' tell yeh how sorry he wuz he'd wronged yeh. He'd been t' N' York, he said, an' left off his bad ways an' worked hard an' tried t' make a man of himself so yeh cud be proud o' him, he said, 'stid o' bein' a disgrace t' yeh. He didn't write, he said, 'cause he wanted t' do somepin first but someway everything went wrong with him. He'd been merried, he said, t' a dear little woman who had suffered everything with him an' 'en died. He couldn't stand no more after that, he said, somehow it tuk all th' tuck out o' him. Then he tuk down sick an' 'en he started back fer home. It 'uz snowin' when he got t' th' village an' looked bad in th' north, but he said he couldn't wait, so he started

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out through th' snow. He cudn't get no further'n my place. He never did get no further. There wuz a little baby in th' bundle. I didn't know what it wuz till it cried. He'd wrapped it all up an' 'en tuk off his overcoat an' put that round it too. His face lit up when he heard it cry. 'Give it t' me,' he said, an' I picked th' little thing up and laid it in his arms. He kissed it an' pretty soon he died. Th' last thing he said 'uz 'Tell father I know he'll fergive me, an' 'll be good t' my little girl. Jim's little girl.' "

Ridgeby heard a half sob behind him. Sibley was standing in the doorway of her room a breathless listener.

"I brought her up here an' laid her on th' steps an' went away an' never said nahthin'."

Ridgeby gave a cry. He opened his arms. Sibley sprang into them.

"Our little girl," he cried. "Jim's little girl. Th' Lord's fergive me at last. Jim's little girl. Jim's little girl."

Chapter XX

A BROAD glare of sunshine broke through the window into the Ridgeby kitchen and bathed the homely room in a flood of light. It wrought a yellow rug upon the floor and hung the walls with tapestries of sunbeams and shadows. The rude furniture was gilded to a royal richness and the simple pictures were burnished with glowing tints. The sunshine found a reflection in the faces of everyone about the place. The day before a hundred clouds had been swept away from the single horizon of the Ridgebys' lives, and the sunshine of happiness had broken through with a delicious warmth that had stolen the aches from every heart. Sibley was singing blithely as she dashed about the kitchen. She seemed bubbling over with happiness. The crimson had come back to her cheeks and the laughter to her eyes. That wistful expression, that herald of an aching heart, that had sat upon her features

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like a cloud so long had lifted itself. The face seemed the brighter from the contrast. She was singing "Bon Ami" with a hearty good will. It was the first time the notes had hung upon her lips for a long time. They seemed to kiss them as they fell. Mrs. Ridgeby's kindly face had taken on a glow of happiness that lighted her homely features to beauty. Now and then she would look lovingly at Sibley as though she were some long lost treasure lately recovered. Whenever Ridgeby passed the window he nodded in with a cheery face that seemed to have lost the cares of a quarter of a century.

Newton was sitting out upon the kitchen steps. It was a position he considered a vantage ground, for from there he could watch Sibley all the time. He could follow her as she flitted about the little kitchen and he could watch her as well when her various duties called her out into the yard. This was the first time he had been out. He wondered himself that his strength had proved equal to it, but

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that morning a new strength seemed to have come upon him. The confines of his bed took on a new irksomeness. The song of the birds and the glare of the sunshine seemed to be calling him out, and when he heard Sibley's voice echoing a happy strain above them all he had found the summons too fair to be resisted. He looked rather wan sitting there in the sunshine and Sibley cast anxious glances toward him. Their eyes met. His asked a question. Hers smiled back an answer.

Lilt was chopping wood. He had thrown off his hat and coat and rolled his sleeves to the elbow. He sent his axe gleaming about his head with a swinging grace and buried it into the logs with a sturdy "Huh!" There was a half grin upon his face. He was sending his chips flying in every direction with a reckless abandon. Old Reuben was building a pile with mathematical preciseness. Every few moments he would retire a rod or so and survey his work with a squint. He was just bending stiffly to gather an armful of stovelengths when a chip

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struck him a smart clip on the ear. He dropped his load and turned with a sputtered complaint.

“Ef yeh’ll take my *advice*——”

Another chip hit him. He ducked his head and glared wrathfully at Lilt, whom he half suspected of purposely aiming the chips in his direction. Lilt’s face was as blank as a stone wall.

“Ef yeh’ll take my *advice*,” he cackled. “Yeh’ll mind yer own bizness.”

He stooped for his armful of wood again, cocking up one eye in an attempt to keep Lilt’s axe in sight. Lilt winked broadly at Newton and with a dextrous motion made his axe hit just the end of a stick. It went whizzing past Reuben’s ears. The old man stumbled to his feet.

“What yeh tryin’ t’ do, kill me?” he gasped. “Yeh think yeh’r smart don’t yeh. What yeh want t’ do is t’ get merried. Yeh can’t get merried t’ quick. Yeh need somebody t’ take th’ smart out o’ yeh. Yeh’ll get jawed. Oh, I

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know, yeh'll get jawed. Do yeh good, too."

Reuben limped around the corner of the house twitching his ears. Lilt roared. Just then Mrs. Ridgeby came to the kitchen door. She held a small basket in her hand.

"Oh, Hiram!" she called, "Hiram!"

Ridgeby was just coming out from the hen house. He dropped his pan of meal and started for the door.

"I've fixed up a little basket o' things, Hiram," she said, gently, "'At I want yeh t' take down t' Miss Latey. I'm 'fraid she's kind o' feeble an' not able t' do much fer herself. They's some jell' an' things here. I know she'll like 'em. It'll show we don't treasure nahthin' agin her, too."

The smile faded from Ridgeby's face. A hard expression came over it. He waited a moment before he answered her.

"I don't think I c'n go down there," he said slowly. "I don't think I can."

"Now, Hiram," his wife pleaded.

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"Think how she's made us suffer. Em'ly I can't ferget it. When she cud 's easy made us happier."

"Perhaps she has made mistakes, Hiram, but there hain't none of us that's free from 'em."

"I can't call what she did a mistake. It 'uz willful."

"Perhaps it was fer th' best, Hiram. Perhaps it was fer th' best. All things work t'gether, yeh know."

"Hadn't we had suff'rin' enough, Em'ly?"

"But she tried t' make it right, Hiram."

Ridgeby turned away.

"I can't do it, Em'ly," he said, shaking his head. "Perhaps I'd orter but I can't."

"Hiram," said his wife slowly, "Please."

Ridgeby turned and looked at her. She held out the basket.

"Please," she repeated.

Ridgeby's face softened. He hesitated. Then he slowly reached his hand out for the basket.

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"Yeh allus was a better Christian 'un me," he said huskily, and started slowly down through the orchard.

The dew was on the grass and it glistened in the sun. A little later the sun would rise higher and lick up the little jewels and the grass blades, robbed of their diamond settings, would look yellow and faded. The air was full of harmony. The birds were twittering around him. At intervals the whistle of a gopher would break into the music. The wind was blowing just strong enough to raise now and then a chord in the cottonwoods.

Ridgeby brightened up under the influence around him and quickened his pace. Whistling he made his way across the fields until the little red store came in sight. Then he stopped whistling and walked more slowly.

"I wist Eiliene want s' queer," he said to himself as he approached the corners. He unconsciously used the name that belonged to the girl of long ago. It was almost the first time he had spoken it since the time they went to spelling schools and paring bees together. He

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repeated the name again slowly, as though there was something pleasant in the sound, "Eiliene."

He was called out of his reverie by the raspings of a rude voice at his elbow. It startled him.

"Hello, Ridgeby." He looked up. Abner Hawkins had come up to him.

"I 'us jest goin' over t' yer place," Abner said. "Glad I met yeh. Save me th' trip."

"Wa-al."

"Dad wanted me t' see yeh again 'bout th' mortgage. It's due yeh know, Friday."

"Wa-al what about it?" Ridgeby asked mechanically, as though he was thinking but little of what Abner was saying.

"Dad says he's sorry he's in th' place he is, fer he'd like t' 'commodate yeh more seein' he an' you'll be pretty near kin 'fore long. But he's figgered every way an' don't see no other way out. He's got t' have money an' 'long as yeh can't get it fer him he'll have t' take th' farm. He's sorry but he's got t' do it."

"Wa-al."

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"He says though 'at ef yeh'll jest deed th' farm over t' him without his goin' t' th' expense o' foreclosin' he'll 'low yeh what it'ud cost him. Dad wants t' be uz lib'ral with yeh uz he can."

Ridgeby chuckled.

"Wa-al, wa-al Abner yeh ought t' be proud o' havin' sech a lib'rel father. He's a reg'ler philanthropist ain't he. He'll 'low me what it 'ud cost t' foreclose ef I'll jest deed th' farm right over t' him 'thout no trouble."

Ridgeby chuckled again and bobbed his head.

"Seems t' me that's a lib'rel offer," Abner said gruffly. "He don't need t' do that, yeh know."

"Well yeh tell yer father, Abner 'at he c'n rest easy on th' mortgage," he said severely. "I've made arrangements t' pay it off."

He started to turn away.

"Oh, by the way," he said, reaching awkwardly down into the breast pocket of his coat and bringing out a dainty envelope. "Sibley said I was t' give yeh this, ef I saw yeh."

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He turned away with another chuckle, leaving Abner staring after him."

Ridgeby had nearly reached the little red store when he saw Crazy Bet hurrying toward him. She was beckoning to him excitedly. The smile had died from her face. She caught at his arm. Raising herself on her toes she whispered hoarsely in his ears:

"They laid down jes' like little dogs an' died. Yes, they laid down jes' like little dogs an' died."

She sprang away from him and crouched trembling in a fence corner moaning:

"They laid down like little dogs an' died. Yes, they laid down jes' like little dogs an' died."

The words affected Ridgeby strangely and he turned on his way half fearfully.

When he came around the corner of the store he found the door closed. There were no signs of life about the place. He knocked upon the door and waited. It was not opened. Then he knocked again and louder. Still no response.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

"Miss Latey. Oh, Miss Latey," he called.

The crow of a cock away off in the distance was the only answer he received.

He was just about to turn away when obeying a sudden impulse, he tried the door. It was not locked and he opened it and entered the store. The old lady's knitting was resting on the sugar barrel, but its owner was nowhere in sight.

"Miss Latey! Oh, Miss Latey!" he called again. Still no answer.

"It's mighty queer," the old man said to himself, as he carefully made his way between the tables upon which the meagre stock was stacked. "I never knowed her t' go way no place. Em'ly 'll be mighty put out ef she don't get this basket."

He pushed his way on expecting the prim form of the little proprietress to descend upon him every second. He kept on until he reached the little living room behind. He knocked timidly upon it. A deeper silence.

He hesitated a moment, then pushed open the

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

door and taking off his tattered hat peered in. "Eiliene!" he called, "Eiliene!"

Something of the old Eiliene there seemed to be in that figure fallen by the bed. The wan cheeks looked fresher than they had for a long time. Perhaps the tears that stained the withered cheeks had washed out some of the wrinkles. The thin lips were parted in a smile, and the eyes, that had so long darted fire, had in them a tender look of love. They were turned with a last look at a worn daguerreotype that was clasped in her hand.

"Eiliene!" he called again. Bending forward he touched her cheek. It was cold. His eyes fell upon the daguerreotype. He started a little as he looked at the faded likeness. As he straightened up a dreamy look came into his eyes, his rugged face softened, he brushed his hard, work cracked hands across his eyes. He turned and looked out the door as though fearing there might be some one to see. He hesitated a moment, then bending awkwardly he kissed the blue lips.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

“Well,” he said with a sigh, rising up, “P’raps there was a love scrape mixed up in it somer’s, but I’m sure I didn’t know nahthin’ ’bout it.”

He tenderly lifted the body and placed it upon the bed, and gently drawing the picture from the stiff fingers he put it into his pocket.

“I wondered what she did with ’at dagger-type I gin her,” he said, as he went out where the birds were singing and the trees were sighing with the rising wind.

“I guess I’d better git Em’ly,” he added, as he started slowly across the fields.

Chapter XXI

FOR an hour Newton sat on the steps watching the chips fly from Lilt's axe. Once in awhile he would turn and smile in at Sibley. He had but little to say. There was pleasure enough in simply being able to look about him and see something besides blank walls. The sunshine shed a delicious warmth about him. The yellow fields seemed to be smiling at him. The leaves on the ground seemed to be rustling a welcome to him. The very cackling of the hens had a note of good-fellowship in it. The gush of life was leaping in his veins again. His heart was wonderfully light. He felt as though he would like to break into a song. He felt that he was a victor not only in the struggle for life but in the struggle for love. He could not feel that should he speak again he would be met with a disappointment. How he wanted to speak again. He had spoken again. It was with his eyes, and he felt that Sibley's eyes had given him an answer.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

"You seem wonderfully happy, Lilt," he said, after awhile, interrupting Lilt's whistle.

Lilt poised his axe for a second in the air, then sent it down with a will that split an oak knot in two.

"Yeh don't look very glum yerself," he returned, "For a feller 'at's been worryin' about goin' t' a weddin' he didn't want t', yeh look mighty chipper."

Newton smiled. He reached down and plucked a blade of withered grass.

"When am I going to have the pleasure of attending yours," he asked. "I am more interested in that just now."

Lilt looked over at him.

"What's th' matter with doublin' up an' makin' it a fam'ly affair," he asked.

Newton looked a trifle grave.

"All victories are not so easily won as yours," he answered.

"Hump!"

Lilt stopped to rest for a moment.

"Yeh'd better take th' advice yeh give me.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

Take yer own med'cine. Keep a stiff upper lip an' don't get down hearted whatever happens. It did me a' heap o' good an' may help you."

Newton looked at the ground for a moment.

"Perhaps I will, but tell me when are you and Sue going to set up housekeeping?"

Reuben had come around from the front of the house. He took off his hat and swung it at a hornet.

"Ef he'll take my *advice*," he quavered, "He'll get merried right away. He needs somebody t' take keer of him. A good jawin' 'll do him good. Oh, I know. What he needs is jawin'. She'll jaw him. She'll jaw him. I know. They allus does."

Lilt turned on him suddenly.

"Say, Rube," he asked, "Were you ever married?"

Reuben waved his hat at the hornet again and grinned.

"Ef yeh'll take my *advice* yeh'll believe I hev. Hain't I here?"

"What's that got t' do with it?"

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

"Oh, yeh'll know quick enough. She'll jaw yeh. They allus does."

"Did she jaw you?"

"Did she jaw me. Well, I shud think they did. First one I merried didn't do nahthin' but eat n' jaw, th' next didn't do nahthin' but jaw 'n eat. But th' two of 'em want a sucumstance t' th' last one. Sh' cud eat 'n jaw at th' same time an' I lit out. Oh, I know. She'll jaw yeh good. They allus does."

Reuben put his hat back on his head, grinned maliciously and shambled off toward the barn. Lilt laughed uproariously.

"Poor ole Rube. Yeh must 'a had a hard time of it," he shouted.

"Are you not frightened at the prospect?" Newton asked.

Lilt rested his axe on a log.

"Tell yeh what 'tis, Newt," he said, "I like t' hear Sue's voice s' much 'at it 'ud be music t' hear her jaw," he grinned. "She does jaw now. She thinks she's awful fierce sometimes, but it sounds t' me jes' like th' scoldings of a sassy wren. It's music, that's what it is."

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

"I want to know when you and Sue are going to be married," Newton asked again.

Lilt went to work again.

"Well we're ready any time. I've made all 'rangements fer th' Jackson place, an' Sue's little fixin's are all done, but there hain't no house on th' farm an' I hain't got no money t' build one. What's th' use of havin' a bird less yeh've got a cage t' put her in. So we've 'bout decided we'll have t' wait. I'm goin' t' stay with Ridgeby this year an' try an' raise a crop, too. It's kind o' disappointed us both, but I guess it's th' best way. I guess we can wait."

A shadow passed over Lilt's face but it passed in a moment. Newton chewed for a while on the blade of grass he had pulled. He seemed to be in a study.

"Lilt," he said, suddenly, looking up. "I have decided to loan you the money to build you a house."

Lilt's axe was high in the air. It dropped at his feet.

"What's that?" he exclaimed.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

“I have decided to lend you the money to build you a house.”

Lilt looked at him thunderstruck.

“You lend me th’ money t’ build a house,” he stammered. “D’ye mean that?”

“I do.”

Lilt walked up to Newton and seized his hand.

“Yeh’re goin’ t’ lend me th’ money to build a house. Why——.” He hesitated. “Yeh allus was a queer feller Newt. There was never no tellin’ what yeh was goin’ t’ do next. I can’t understand this. Yeh know yeh never let us think yeh was anything but——”

“A tramp picked up in the road,” Newton finished.

“No, there didn’t none of us think yeh wuz a tramp. We all knowed better’n that. Yeh wuz above all of us, ’cept Sibley. There cudn’t nobody be ’bove her, less ’twas an angel.”

“Well never mind what I am but I am going to lend you the money to build you a house.”

Lilt’s voice was husky.

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

“I hain’t never asked no questions,” he said, “An’ I hain’t goin’ t’ ask none now. Don’t seem like yeh mean what yeh say, but I know yeh do. I can’t thank yeh much. It’s kind o’ upset me like.” He stopped and looked at Newton. “I know yeh don’t want to be thanked. I’m goin’ t’ tell Sue.”

He turned abruptly and stalked down through the orchard.

Just then Sibley came out the door. She had finished her morning’s work and had dressed for the day. She sat down beside him. She looked up at him. Both smiled when their eyes met.

Newton was sure that he had never seen Sibley look prettier than she did just then. There was a half blush on her face, a loving light in her eyes. She looked at the ground as though she was afraid to let her eyes meet his again.

“Sibley,” Newton said slowly, “I believe I am strong enough to walk a little ways if I had some one to help me.”

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

Sibley flushed. She hesitated a moment.

"Come then," she said, getting up. "I am strong. I will help you."

They turned down the lane until they came to the road. Indian summer had flung her golden banners to the breeze. The maple trees had decked themselves in a wealth of gold and crimson. The copse was glorious with colour. The sun shone down lazily and the marsh mists went up to meet it. A heaviness hung in the air. A fairy influence seemed exerted to make everything that had existence seem unreal. The landscape had the appearance one would expect to see through eyes *lotus heavy*.

They walked slowly. Newton was still very weak and he leaned heavily upon Sibley's arm. Neither spoke. They did not need to speak. Each one felt the thoughts the other would like to utter. There was a happiness in each heart that found a better vent in silence than in words. The charm of the day wrought its subtle influence about them and distilled its quiet happiness into their hearts. Each was in a *revery*.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

They were called out of it by the sounds of horses' feet coming up behind. They stepped to the side of the road. A covered wagon drove past. A swarthy, hard-faced man was on the front seat. His cold eyes were staring straight ahead of him. By his side sat a woman with faded cheeks and pale, washed-out eyes. But there was a softened expression about the corners of her mouth and she threw eager glances now and then at her companion. She held a sleeping baby in her arms. Newton recognised the driver. It was Hi Simms. The wagon came to a stop. Simms put his head out from the cover.

"Glad t' see yeh gettin' about," he said gruffly. "Sorry yeh got hurt. Gee, up, Gee!"

The wagon rumbled on. As it passed a frizzled headed youngster put his head out of the hole in the back of the cover. There was a happy grin on his face.

"We're goin' t' Aunt Marcey's in Illinoy," he shouted. The wagon soon disappeared up the road.

Newton smiled.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

"I suppose that is Simms's way of telling me that he has forgiven me for having whipped him. I wonder what has changed him?"

"Perhaps, from the expression I saw on his wife's face," Sibley answered slowly, "it was love."

"Yes," Newton answered. "Perhaps it was love."

They walked on a ways in silence.

"Sibley," Newton asked, after awhile, "Do you remember a long time ago when we walked along this road together.

Sibley bent her head.

"Yes," she answered, softly. "It seems ages ago."

"Do you remember how dark the roadway was that night?"

"Yes, and so full of shadows."

"Are there any of the shadows left?"

Sibley's head bent further down as Newton looked at her. They had just come to the top of a little knoll. Before them the road pitched down into a swale. Newton stopped.

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

“Sibley,” he said earnestly, “Look up at me.”

She raised her eyes, but they fell again.

“It was standing just here, Sibley,” Newton whispered, “That once I wanted to tell you that I loved you. I had not meant to say it, but it rushed unbidden to my lips. I can yet hear your cry ringing in my ears, ‘Don’t.’ It pierced me then to the quick. Its sound was like a knell. Now I know why you said it. We are in the same place, again, Love, in the same place. Then it was night. Now it is day. Then there were great black shadows all about us. Now the sun is shining. Now, if I wanted to tell you that I loved you would you say ‘Don’t’?”

Sibley looked up at him. There were tears glittering in her eyes.

“Would I say Don’t,” she returned. “No. Did I want to say it again I could not do it. But, Oh, Newton, there is still one shadow about us. Until yesterday it was not a shadow. I stopped you before for a duty,” she hesitated,

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

“only for a duty. I cared not for your shadow. I did not know who I was myself. I did not ask——”

Newton stopped her. He turned his eyes up the road.

“Wait Sibley,” he said, quietly. “I know what you would say. I will clear that shadow. It should never have been a shadow at all. It was but an idle whim. I scarcely know why I pursued it.” He stopped for a moment.

“Look up the road, Love,” he said. “Where does it come from. Look down it, where does it end?”

Sibley shook her head.

“Away up that road, miles and miles from here, at the very head of it stands my home. It is a beautiful home. It has stood there for two generations. Tall elm trees wave their branches all about it. A great evergreen hedge hides it from the road. The doves make their nests about the eaves. The road climbs a hill a little way in front of the house and disappears. When I was a little fellow I used to wonder

The ROAD *to* RIDGEBY'S

where it went to. Almost the first thing I remember is looking up that road and trying to think what was on the other side of the hill. I have sat for hours looking up its dusty length, watching every turn and twist until it reached the top. It always seemed to me that when it reached the top it looked back at me before it plunged down on the other side as though to invite me go with it. I used to dream of that road. I wondered if it did not lead to fairyland. What was hidden away off there toward the west? One day I escaped from my nurse and got out into the road and followed it to the top of the hill. To me then that point was the end of the earth. What would I see when I came to the top of the hill? Was my fairyland there? Would I see castles and palaces and gardens and all the shiny glories of elfland? I remember yet how my heart beat as I panted toward the top. When I reached it I scarcely dared look ahead. I shut my eyes for a moment, then opened them quickly. The road wound its way down the hill, crossed a culvert,

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

climbed another hill, and disappeared again. But the disappointment only added to the fascination of that mysterious road. Where did it lead to? Where did it end? When I reached manhood its fascination was as strong as in boyhood. I had been to college, had followed the roads that led to Rome, had explored all the odd corners of the earth, but my old mystery was as great a mystery as ever. One day I found myself alone at the old home. Father and mother had gone down the road. They could never come up it again. The thought came to me, 'Did I go down the road, would I ever come up it again?' I sat out under the elm trees after the funeral. I had sent all the relatives and friends away. I wanted to be alone. I sat and looked down the road. Stronger than ever the thought came to me, stronger even than when I thought it must lead to fairyland, 'Where does it lead to? Where does it end?' The old impulse to follow it came over me again, powerful, irresistible. I went out the gate, locked it, and half mechani-

The ROAD to RIDGEBY'S

cally started up the hill. I followed it for days and weeks, on, on, on, but it always climbed a hill a little way ahead of me and disappeared. I followed it past fields and factories where men were working, past prisons where they were suffering, past churches where they were praying, past houses where they were dying. That same inexplicable fascination led me on. Where does it lead to? Where does it end? Sometimes the sun shone on it. Again black clouds lowered over it. Sometimes a gentle rain fell upon it. Again the black dust blew up from it in clouds. Sometimes I passed a wedding party upon it. Sometimes a funeral. I followed it on and on until it has led me to, to——.”

Newton stopped and looked down at Sibley. He opened his arms. With a sigh Sibley felt them closing about her.

“To Heaven.”

A feathery cloud that had been sailing in the azure above them passed over the face of the sun. A shadow fell upon them. Sibley half

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shuddered. Newton, looking away across the fields, saw a man's head come in sight above a swale. Though it was far away Newton knew it was Abner Hawkins. In a moment he disappeared and the cloud sailing lazily on its way passed from the sun and the light fell upon them again.

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